

Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism: An Ecocritical Analysis of the Selected Poems of Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop

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ABSTRACT

Nature poets, Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop, are concerned with the natural world and the human world. Anthropocentric and Ecocentric outlooks are explored here in terms of their dominant behaviour towards environment. This paper analyzes that: To what extent do these poets go beyond the anthropocentric world to reach the ecocentric world? And do both the poets create a sympathetic attitude towards the natural world of flora and fauna? Or do they have different outlooks of perceiving nature? The dealing of these poets with environmental degradation can reveal the inherent politics of anthropocentric ideology. Moreover, their poems are concerned with the relationship of the humans to the land and other creatures of the earth and also reveal the interaction and contact between the man-made/materialistic/human and natural/non-human world. So, the focus is on how both the poets depict, present and use the natural scenario and natural world in their poems in order to depict the relationship between the human and non-human world.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, nature, human, non-human

Ecocriticism is an approach to study the relationship between the human and the non-human world in literature. It studies and analyzes nature writings in literary and cultural studies. Ecocriticism also explores the role of 'place' in literature and other cultural texts. So, 'place' is considered as a new critical category in addition to class, race and gender.

Some other terms used to name this theory are literature and environmental studies, environmental literary criticism, ecopoetics, green studies and green cultural studies. Different ecocritics and theorists have defined Ecocriticism in their own ways. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "... the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment ... ecocriticism takes an earth - centred approach to literary studies" (xviii).

In other words, the subject of Ecocriticism deals with the interconnections between nature and culture. It is believed that literary theory analyzes the relations between writers, texts and the world

where the 'world' refers to the society or the social sphere. But Ecocriticism extends the notion of the 'world' and encompasses the whole ecosphere within its range.

Ecocriticism has further developed and flourished into different branches with different concerns, by involving and interacting with other theoretical and philosophical fields. Anthropocentric is the world view where human beings are given the central position and all other entities are pushed to the margin. This privileging of one entity over the other gives rise to all sorts of power structure of exploitation.

Anthropocentrism names any stance, perception or conception that takes the human as centre or norm. An 'anthropocentric' view of the natural world thus sees it entirely in relation to the human, for instance as a resource for economic use, or as the expression of certain social or cultural values – so even an aesthetics of landscape appreciation can be anthropocentric. (Clark 3)

The western discourses have been dominated by this ideology from the very beginning. But in order to resist such an attitude a different view was propounded by the environmentalists and ecocritics. This view is either called 'ecocentrism' or 'biocentrism' and centralizes the non-human world, "Anthropocentrism is often contrasted with a possible biocentric stance, one attempting to identify with all life or a whole ecosystem, without giving such privilege to just one species" (Clark 3). Moreover, the natural world enjoys independent status which does not exist for the human beings. Nature exists not for human beings but as a co-entity along with human beings which comes under the study of deep ecology. The ecologists advocate for the recognition of the value of non-humans in themselves and their independent status.

Robert Frost has presented a natural world or environment with which human beings interact in their daily life. In Frost's poetic world, the environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence which determines the behaviour of the people living in it. And the remarkable thing about Robert Frost is that he does not glorify or idealise Nature as Romantics did. His is a realistic approach towards Nature which not only shows its benevolence but at the same time its malevolence. On the other hand, Elizabeth Bishop's actual achievement rests on her keen observation of the natural world. Her poetry is marked by a deep gaze at the landscapes, containing animals and human beings. She foregrounds nature. Detailed facts of the natural world usually become the main concern of Bishop's poems. Having different backgrounds, Frost and Bishop have suffered a lot in their life facing tragedies and deaths of their near and dear ones.

Although their personal life was miserable and both chose to turn to natural world and poetry, Frost and Bishop did not wander around the world lamenting over their tragedies and finding comfort. Both involved themselves in deep observation, real and detailed description of the world. Being focussed on the natural world, Frost and Bishop express objectivity in their writings. Both the poets express the natural world in terms of landscapes, mountains, hills, wild flowers, precarious farms, birches, natural creatures, fish, woods, pasture springs, seeds, buds, and so on. Frost depicts nature as hard and soft,

tender and strong, positive and negative. Nature can destroy, thwart, disappoint, frustrate, and beat anyone or everyone. So, for him, man's relation to nature, as to his fellows, is both together and apart. On the other hand, Bishop parallels the world of human and non-human and she celebrates the autonomous nature of the natural creatures and the natural world. But the style of both the poets is characterised by precision, objectivity and delicacy. The first poem to be discussed here is "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" by Frost that reflects the attitude of the human beings to the natural world. Here, the poet persona tries to explore, understand and explain the contrast that existed between the world of nature and man-made world or human world. The persona describes the incident of the destruction of a house (man-made) that had caught fire. The whole house got victimised by the fire except the towering chimney and the barn that stood opposite to the house. The noticeable thing is that the persona is wondering at the partial nature of the natural world stated as:

*The barn opposed across the way,
That would have joined the house in flame
Had it been the will of the wind, was left
To bear forsaken the place's name. (5-8)*

Here the question is: Is the wind (natural world) in real sense got partial to save the barn from the fire? If it is so then the wind (natural world) might want to save the barn because it belongs to the non-human world. This means that the wind destroyed the house and saved the barn deliberately. Further the persona observes that the barn also gets isolated and gives a deserted look. And no more teams of oxen could be seen that used to come earlier to the barn and now it is used by birds. Here the persona is trying to blend the human with the non-human when it is said, "The birds that came to it through the air / At broken windows flew out and in, / Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh" (13-15). So, he equates the chirp of the birds with the human sigh for the things that are no more.

The truth comes out when the persona realises the renewable state of the natural world: "Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf" (17). This means that when it is spring, the lilac flowers and even the aged elm shoots forth new leaves. Nature seems

to be booming and generating new life. It keeps on moving unaffected by the loss of the house. So, Change and renewal is the constant law of nature and the persona realises that the world of nature is not like the human world. It is free of all the worldly complexities of human beings. So, the poet withdraws the emotion and reasons out that the birds have no reason to be sad. As it is stated,

For them there was really nothing sad.

But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,

One had to be versed in country things

Not to believe the phoebes wept. (21-24)

On the other hand, Bishop's "The Monument" is a poem which shows the contrast between the human or man-made world and the natural world. While addressing the readers, the persona asks them drawing their attention to the monument. She explains herself in a casual manner using similes for it. She says,

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood

built somewhat like a box. No. Built

like several boxes in descending sizes

one above the other. (1-4)

Here, the rough style of description and structure of the monument displays the deliberate coarseness. The monument has been affected by the natural world. The weather, environmental conditions and time have affected it deeply. It is "outlined with shoddy fret-work, half-fallen off,/cracked and unpainted. It looks old" (48-49). So the monument is shown far away from perfection and is tied to its physical environment. Bishop states,

—The strong sunlight, the wind from the sea,

all the conditions of its existence,

may have flaked off the paint, if ever it was painted,

and made it homelier than it was. (50-53)

Bishop's monument is not to be taken as some static artistic work placed in a museum rather her monument contains the effect of its physical environment and its aesthetic experience must take consideration of its historical construction and its decay over time. "Whereas a monument is usually fixed and static, Bishop's monument, an emblem for the kind of poetry she wants to write, is shaped by its environment and history even as

it shapes the way we see the landscape it inhabits" (Knickerbocker 67). So, in the poem Bishop's focus is on the process rather than on the fixed object. As she says,

The monument's an object, yet those decorations,

carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,

give it away as having life, and wishing;

wanting to be a monument, to cherish something. (64-67)

Here the gerunds used by the poet like 'having', 'wishing', 'wanting' denotes that the poet has tried to focus on the process of its making but not on a fixed object. The concluding lines reflect the beginning of the process of becoming or attaining the absolute. It is the beginning of a painting,/ a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,/ and all of wood. Watch it closely" (78-80). So, the idea of artwork as timeless and fixed held by the Romantics is opposed in the poem. Time and environment play an important part in the process of one thing or the other.

So, the poem could be taken as the clash between the anthropocentric and ecocentric world. The old cracked monument, which is man-made and symbolises anthropocentrism, has been ruined and destroyed by the natural or ecocentric world, that is, the sunlight, the wind or the rain. Now, after getting worn out, the monument becomes the real artefact of the wood. Previously it was man-made with all the formalistic perfection and paints. And the physical environment has tried to remove the human stamp with the help of air, water and sunlight. But actually its human stamp can always be detected because "it can shelter what is within" (75). Another interpretation could be that when the human tries to gain power over the land or make use of the natural world for his own self, the natural world shows its resistance in return. And even the human world could not bear the resistance of the natural world or its wilderness and feels uncomfortable in the wild and isolated area. It is shown here when the poet says,

"Why did you bring me here to see it?

A temple of crates in cramped and crated scenery,
what can it prove?

I am tired of breathing this eroded air,

this dryness in which the monument is cracking." (54-58)

So, the humans feel suffocated with the dynamic nature and its effects on the human world.

Robert Frost has established himself as a poet of Nature but the originality of Frost's nature poems is that in the landscape there is always a human figure. According to Fagan,

In Frost's poems, people find themselves in confrontations with nature that are a cause for reflection and an opportunity for learning. Instead of depicting the effects of nature on human beings after a confrontation, Frost describes the process of working through a conflict with nature and resolving it somewhat satisfactorily. (393)

And such a confrontation is presented in his "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". Here, the contact or relationship between human beings and nature is depicted very beautifully. What happens here is that a rider passes through the woods covered with snow and he reflects upon the phenomena of life through the use of nature symbols or images:

*The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. (13-16)*

On a surface reading it appears to be simple, descriptive record of close, minute observation, a series of homely but vivid pictures. But on a critical scrutiny of the poem, layers of meaning unfold before us. The poem achieves its climax of responsibility in the last stanza – the promises to be kept and the obligations to be fulfilled. Through personal experiences, the poet expresses a universal conflict felt by every sensitive individual. On the one hand, there is the beauty of nature which can be enjoyed by remaining away from the day to day mundane life. But the condition of modern man is that he cannot do so even though he wishes to do so. The materialistic and anthropocentric ideology overpowers all the aesthetic and sensible tendencies of human beings. The appreciation of nature requires a man to be idealistic and ecocentric.

It is a salient characteristic of Frostian poetry to depict a vast philosophy of life in a few words and everywhere life is connected to nature from where it has emerged and will ultimately merge. "He believed in old – fashioned virtues and made them seem important; above all, he could sum up

a situation, a person, or mood in a phrase which held one's attention and yet by its simplicity could be understood by readers of all ages" (Albert 548).

In this poem, a tribal experience leads the persona to a profound realisation. The persona does not want to leave the woods – perhaps he wants to retain with him, in this dark moment, a great discovery. No amount of rational logic can account for the will to stay on in the woods. But the rational part of the speaker is superseded by the instinct. There are attractions and temptations aroused by the natural scenario. And there are other temptations and responsibilities lurking behind the persona. In this way he is in a conflict or dilemma where he cannot decide between nature and material, soul and body, abstract and concrete, universal and individual. The whole poem is trying to solve these binary oppositions. One ideology is pulling a man towards the matter or material whereas the other is pulling him towards nature. So, it is the duty of human beings to decide between both the variants.

Similarly, "The Imaginary Iceberg" is a poem by Bishop from her collection *North and South*, which, on the surface level, presents the idea that nature has the ability to inspire the individuals and its innate beauty could not match and surpass the man-made objects. Bishop uses the "imaginary iceberg" which symbolises the goals in individual's life and the "ship" which symbolises the unpredictable path that leads to their specific goals. The opening lines of the poem describe the choice of iceberg over the ship.

*We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,
although it meant the end of travel.
Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock
and all the sea were moving marble. (1-4)*

Here the persona talks on the behalf of all sailors/ passengers on the ship (or metaphorically all human beings in this world). They want to possess the icebergs/ seas (natural world) after having enjoyed their ownership of materialistic world or man-made objects like the ship. But the natural world is not easy to control or possess and it could be dangerous for the ship (human beings). So the ship ignored the icebergs and moved on. But the sailors are watching icebergs with longing eyes. This could be stated that human beings prefer to stay in comfort zone and

from there they want to enjoy the natural world. As Bishop states that,

*This is a scene a sailor'd give his eyes for.
The ship's ignored. The iceberg rises
and sinks again; its glassy pinnacles
correct ellipsics in the sky. (12-15)*

There comes similarity between the sun and stare of the sailors as both are dangerous to icebergs. And icebergs want to save themselves from these dangerous stares. So the question is whether the icebergs are dangerous for the ship (human world) or human beings are dangerous to icebergs? As stated by Bishop,

*This iceberg cuts its facet from within.
Like jewellery from a grave
it saves itself perpetually and adorns
only itself, perhaps the snows
which so surprise us lying on the sea. (23-27)*

Towards the last stanza, Bishop presents the strange reality of the iceberg. The vast and solid iceberg unveils itself as a strange hermetic place which is a symbol of the self. It adorns itself and protects itself for all the time which is another emblem of the self. Bishop uses simile such as "like jewellery from a grave" (24) which reflects some hidden mystery behind it. Bishop personifies the iceberg using different words such as 'fleshed, fair, erected indivisible'. Icebergs are compared to the soul as both are infused with spirit and 'self-made'. So the self-made imaginary iceberg is impressive and self-signifying but it is too mysterious for the human in poem as: "Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off/ where waves give in to one another's waves/ and clouds run in a warmer sky" (28-30).

The title itself seems to be contradictory as it poses a question: Can the imagination stand on itself without a real inspiration? It is quite not possible because one can imagine anything only if one is aware of that thing in real sense.

Another question is that: Can the imagination stretch toward all the complications regarding human beings' dealing with the natural world? So, Bishop's imagination has stretched toward the political implications involved in the representation of the passenger's urge to view the natural world

and their indirect relation to the same which involves exploiter-exploited relationship.

Another poem in which the contrast has been shown between the human world and the world of nature is "Tree At My Window" by Robert Frost. There seems to exist kinship between man and nature in the beginning of the poem. The persona does not want the tree to be out of his vision and avoids drawing the curtain because he seems to have found some affinity between himself and the tree. The poet says,

*Tree at my window, window tree,
My sash is lowered when night comes on,
But let there never be curtain drawn
Between you and me (1-4)*

Later on, the persona observes that due to strong winds the tree comes under the violent spells of movement. Here he also finds the similarity between tree and himself when he is being torn by conflicts and being tossed on the horns of worries and dilemmas. He feels that their condition is similar. So, the idea described here is quite similar to that of the Romantics who believes in the relationship between man and nature. But Frost is different from the Romantics in a way that he usually describes nature in its true sense and presents both the man and nature in their different world having own space and existence. Towards the end of the poem, the persona realises the differences – between the tree and himself and between the world of nature and that of man. He finds that tree could only feel or experience outer weather like strong winds, storms, etc and lacks emotions and intellect. It cannot know and understand the inner weather or inner pain, that is, agony of the soul, spiritual upheaval, and struggle of the mind. Though they are put together but their world and concerns are totally different. As it is stated,

*That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather. (13-16)*

Bishop's "Rain Towards Morning" is the second part of her cluster poem "Four Poems" where the persona describes the contrast between a free and independent world and a world which is restrictive,

bounded and controlled. The birds flew to the sky, once their cage is opened and the freedom is granted. In such a world the power of nature surpasses everything as it is described in the lines,

*The great light cage has broken up in the air,
freeing, I think, about a million birds
whose wild ascending shadows will not be back,
and all the wires come falling down.
No cage, no frightening birds; the rain
is brightening now. (1-6)*

The wires connote man-made world whereas birds are natural beings. So, the wires fall down because in the free world nobody's impression or stamp can hold the central position. So, in a way, this poem is similar to that of "The Monument". In both these poems the human stamp is erased by the workings of nature, the changing weather, the severe sun-rays, the rain, the sea water, the winds and other climatic changes affect the man-made world greatly.

The world where the rules of nature work is free and autonomous from any sort of human and cultural restrictions. This world provides a space which is natural in its basic essence and opposes the anthropocentric world of human domination.

While Frost's "The Road Not Taken" is another masterpiece presenting such a moment which all of us would have experienced at one time or the other in our lives. Here we are not concerned about that moment, but how Frost presented it. Its fineness and popularity rests upon the use of natural scene which prompts the rider to brood upon such a crucial condition of human life. Different critics have interpreted it differently. But something always remained hidden which is very much there but never explored. Frost's particular attention upon the Nature and upon the depiction of a particular scene is significant here. The setting is deliberately chosen to be set in the lap of nature. And the options are not between two occupations or professions but between two modes of thinking and living.

On the one hand there is the life, the human beings and anthropocentric ideology. On the other there is nature or natural-ideology, which is the ultimate source of everything. Choosing one leads to the rejection of other. But both are important for a human being. So the question is not whether to choose one or the other, but how to manage one

along with the other. The poem is suggesting as well as inspiring us to be conscious about the existence of nature and what it demands on our parts. The growth of industrialization and materialization in human civilization has devastated the pure and flourishing environment. The lurking dangers caused by this harmful growth started appearing in the literary and artistic works. The anxiety caused by this destruction of nature is given a significant place by Frost in his poetry. This is the anxiety and dilemma of the poet to choose between two options –ecocentric or anthropocentric.

Frost gives voice to this anxiety or perplexity in the last stanza of the poem where he sings:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference. (16-20)*

This selection of a road on the part of the persona is the epitome of the poem. Now how do we interpret it? Is it a selection between mere two different professions? Or between two diverse ideologies? We would not be able to justify Frost's approach towards nature if we may say that he is talking about the choice between two diverse modes of ideological thinking –anthropocentric and ecocentric. Actually both of these ideological modes are a creation of human beings. So imposing anything human upon nature means to deny the existence of a devoid, isolated and separate form of nature. Human beings' urge to label everything of this universe according to their own way is challenged by a true and pure focus on nature. And Frost is doing this –presenting nature by separating it from any touch of human influence.

This isolated form of nature is a pure depiction of nature which exists there without accepting any interference from human beings, and which is a whole and full-fledged existence, complete in itself. Ironically it is the first person speaker who is presenting himself to us, with all his faults and foibles. He reveals himself to us as one who is Hamlet-like, who is too intelligent and conscious to do anything without pondering a great deal on the positive and negative aspects of it. He has not yet come to terms with the fact that Man must learn

to accept and live with his limitations. We notice that when the road forks, the narrator regrets that he possibly cannot travel both roads because he is "one traveller". He learns painfully that Man cannot have things all his own way; he is not only bound to make a choice but the choice he makes is irrecoverable. One must hope to get the best of everything. Only one can be selected and the other must be rejected, but the choice must be conscious because it will lead to the future prospects:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood (1-3)*

Frost's "After Apple Picking" is one of the finest poems in *North of Boston*. Again, in this poem, Frost is displaying a natural scene along with a human figure. Both the nature as well as the human figure is isolated from the rest of humanity and both find an affinity with one another. But the remarkable thing to note in this poem is that it describes the monotonous, boring, and busy life of human beings. Even in the lap of nature the persona is not free to enjoy its beauty and charm. Although the beauty and charm are prompting and attracting him to come and took part in it. But the apple-picker is bound to the obligations of his work. As:

*My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough. (1-5)*

This nature lyric presents in front of us an enjoyable scene, although the character which is engaged in the scene does not seem to enjoy it at all. It is a sort of reverie or monologue of an exhausted apple-picker. The day-to-day work makes everyone exhausted, when there is no leave or gap to enjoy the life or nature out of this monotony. The apple-picker's tiredness represents the tiredness of the humanity. This tiredness is caused by over industrialization, urbanization and materialism. After having too much growth, in the form of material, human beings now want something to make them calm down and peaceful. As the persona of the poem said:

*But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night, (6-7)*

Another remarkable thing to note about this poem is the sensuousness as is presented by Frost. There is the fine and sweet aroma of the apples, there is the sound of the wind, and there are the beautiful sights to be seen. Almost all the senses are aroused by such a lovely scene. And it is impossible that one would not find peace over here. Everything around the apple-picker is making him calm-down and restful. This sensuousness connects Frost with Romantic poet John Keats. At the same time it also separates both of them. On the one hand Keats' use of sensuousness is for the gratification of senses whereas Frost use it for the depiction of various qualities of nature which can arouse a human being from his normal and monotonous state of existence to a much blissed and harmonious state where he can enjoy a close relation with the natural world. As:

*The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass. (8-12)*

The poem has been appreciated for its charming and enchanting quality. It is very simple, apt, casual and original. That's why it defies any sort of categorization. Because there is no category of literary forms which may incorporate, all alone, the appreciation and an objective expression of natural world for its own sake. The plentiful of nature is presented, and is used to inspire human beings to put some attention upon the growing devastation of nature which will rob us from such pleasant scenes and treasures of nature. The motif of sleep is used in the poem time and again. Sometimes it is used to present the soothing effects of nature as clearly visible upon human senses, but at other times it is used for the sleeping consciousness of human beings who do not think about the preservation and care of the flora and fauna.

Frost usually presented human figure in the natural world where he is caught within some dilemma and has to choose the materialistic and anthropocentric world. This aspect is shown in his poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". Could it be that his emotional concern is towards humanism or human world? Or could it be that he deliberately chose to present the human world like in order to make the readers understand the reality? On the other hand,

Bishop's poems reflect the autonomous nature of the natural world and brought out the strange reality of the same. In other words, Natural world acts as an autonomous entity along with the human world in the cosmos. She also brought out the existing power of the natural world. The poem "The Monument" presented the contrast between the human and non-human world and also showed the power of the latter. Her poem also shows the effect of time and physical environment on the man-made or human world.

Thus, Frost and Bishop have beautifully described the contrast between anthropocentric and ecocentric views in their own ways. So, at sometimes Frost's poems reflect the human values and duties towards the natural world while Bishop's concern is to reflect the free and autonomous nature of the natural world. Moreover, both the poets use different literary devices like similies, personification and symbols in order to present the natural world which also provides wonderful effects to their poetry.

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