

Singing Nature: an Ecocritical Reading of selected poems of Emily

Bronte and Habba Khatoon

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Abstract:

This paper is a theoretical intervention of some of the poetic works of Emily Bronte, the nineteenth century poet-cum-novelist of England and of Habba Khatoon, a sixteenth century Kashmiri poet. As it is a universal truth that literature is a representation of human life and its various experiences, so revisiting the literary works of some great voices reveals mysteries of life and of nature. Literature is not only a reflection of human life but also of the elements and entities of nature associated to it. Though literature is specifically rooted in debating the dialogue of various ethical, moral, religious, mystic, romantic, philosophic, and scientific discourses, but this paper projects a new ecocritical path to look at literary texts. Such a critical reading is quite instrumental in depicting the role of nature/environment in the life of human beings, and it also projects environment as a subject through which human experiences are given a literary shape. At times such works narrate the human transgression into nature, and at others these put forth the 'imaginative' and 'horrific' shapes of nature. Such texts display the longings of humanity for an ecologically stable aura, and also represent the destruction and damage done to the environmental fabric. This paper comprises of two sections, the first one is an analysis of the theoretical field of Ecocriticism and the second part analyses some of the poetic verses of Emily Bronte and Habba Khatoon in the light of this ecocritical debate.

I

Defining, classifying, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating works of literature are the contents of the studies which we call Literary Criticism. Having a look on the applied part of Literary Criticism, we come across various schools, for example, Mimetic criticism, Structuralism, Post-structuralisms, Formalism, New Criticism, New Historicism, Psychoanalysis, Post colonialism, Feminism, etc. which represent the multidimensional existence of a literary text. In other words, it can be said that these schools give way to the multiple interpretations of a literary text. Ecocriticism is one such school of thought, which has emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Ecocriticism joined the elite brands of literary criticism during the 1970s. A portmanteau of two words—‘ecology’ and ‘criticism’, it deals with the relation between literature and the biological and physical environment around, it frames a critical documentary depicting the human-transgression into nature. It focuses on the importance of environment/atmosphere for human survival and reveals the weak-hold, human life is keeping underneath its feet. To achieve, a philosophical seeming, social and political justice for nature, and a nostalgic undercurrent pointing towards a return to the unspoiled nature in order to restore the lost simplicity are the basic remedial mantras in Ecocriticism. It upholds the basic view that in a stable ecology there is an equal importance of all the organic and inorganic components. So, they try to find out a reflection of this in the literature of a culture. What they crave is that there must evolve a stability between nature and the human-being. Here, I want to quote Seager J., an eco-feminist, who says— “earth as a habitat, and home as habitat ought to be cherished. ‘Chemicals’ and all forms of ‘energy’ that are life-defeating, lead to sickness on the planet, or in the home, can’t be tolerated”. The basic strands leading to an ecocritical interpretation of a literary text are as:

- There is an analysis of the ‘anthropocentric’ ideology of human-beings. How a man tried his dominion over nature and what is the impact.

- Ecocritics also dissect the entity of binaries. Enjoying this play of binaries they openly bring a human being face to face with ‘nature’ and analyse the mythification of nature.
- There is also an analysis of the concept of nature as presented in the literary works, both of men and women.
- Another dimension is an analysis of the role attributed to women in the particular works. How a woman is being (mal) painted against the fantasies of the nature. This covers a full-fledged brand of Feminism, called Eco-feminism.

Now, you may be thinking of this new term ‘eco-feminism’ that has emerged before us, and to understand let me quote M.H. Abrahams, who says, “A conspicuous feature in Ecocriticism is the analysis of the differences in attitudes toward the environment that are attributable to a writers race, ethnicity, social class and gender” (98). Please understand the last word of the quotation, that is, “gender”. This very word along with the ‘environment–part’ of the sentence is what we call Eco-feminism. Eco-feminism belongs to the third wave of Feminism; Rachel Carson and Annette Kolodny gave impetus to this brand of Feminism, eco-feminism is “the analysis of the role attributed to women in fantasies of the natural environment by male authors, as well as the study of specifically feminine conceptions of the environment in the neglected nature-writings by female authors” (Abrahams 96).

Eco-feminists find that in the anthropocentric world view of man, land–nature-female complex is being exploited. Domination of land, nature and woman mars the beauty of their being. Eco-feminists find a resemblance between the subjugation and domination of women by men, and exploitation and spoiling of nature. They argue that land, nature and women are all reproductive, that is, life-supporting. So, the ethics of women are closer to nature/land than are man’s. Eco-feminists find that a woman is in sync with nature and man shows a hierarchal relationship, and tries to dominate the nature. This attitude of male-psyche brings about an ecological crisis, accompanied by an acute crisis at the societal level. The main focus of Eco-feminism is on ecology of nature and of human system.

When Francois d'Edubonne coined the term in 1974, she took it as a cultural and social concern dealing with the relationship that the oppression of women shares with the degradation of nature. In the works of Francois, we can easily trace-out the concept of splits, which is, split between mind and the body, male and the female, human and the nature. All this points towards a power-imbalance, a game of discrimination in which nature and women are being maltreated, stereotyped, exploited, and ruined. The main principles of Eco-feminism are as:

- Reject woman-nature/ man-culture idea.
- Create new cultures that embrace and honour 'caretaking and 'nurturing'
- Live with the earth.
- Embraces women, men of all cultures
- An ecological interconnectedness.
- Concept of power being non-monolithic, non-homogenous and non-anthropocentric.
- Woman as a product of patriarchal culture.
- Manipulation of nature, women and lesser developed cultures at the hands of man.

Before concluding this section on Ecocriticism, let me quote Seager, J., who in her book, *Earth follies Feminism, Politics and the Environment* writes, "Women are the first ones to notice when the water they cook with and bathe the children in, smells peculiar. They are the first to know when the supply of water starts to dry up [...]. They are the first to know when children develop mysterious ailments." (n.page).

II

Keeping this voice in our mind, let's proceed towards Haworth residence to have an introduction of Emily Bronte. The family had such a literary genius that Mathew Arnold penned down a poem "Haworth Churchyard" as a tribute. Born to Patrick Bronte and Marid Branwell at Thornton Yorkshire, Emily Bronte wrote novels and poetry during the late-Romantic and early Victorian periods. Later, the family moved

to Hawthorn Parsonage, which remained a life-long impact on them. Early death of mother, economic turbulence and bad-health always haunted her life. Born in the year 1818, and being a genius, Emily had romantic tastes. She had a fiery and indomitable spirit. She died at age of thirty in 1848, leaving behind *Wuthering Heights* and a treasure of poetic verses. Some of her poems are “Me Thinks This Heart”, “A Day Dream”, “A Death- Scene”, “A Little Budding Rose”, “At Castle Wood”, “Come Walk With Me”, “Stars”, “Sympathy”, “The Philosopher”, “The Night-Wind”, etc. Emily seems to be a mystic of nature, and a pantheistic persona. She has got some seventy odd poems to her name.

Likewise, Habba Khatoon a sixteenth century Kashmiri poetess sings songs of love, separation, and pain. In these songs there is also a reflection of the various nuances of nature. Born in the middle of sixteenth century (most probably in 1554) to a poor family in village Chandhar near Pampore. She is also known as the “nightingale of Kashmir”, and it is widely believed that her original name was *Zoon* (the moon) and from her childhood she was fond of singing. Regarding the singing talent of Habba Khatoon, Trilokinath Raina writes, “Her reputation as a singer spread far and wide. It is quite possible that she pursued her passion seriously and became a mature and perhaps, a professional singer, before being invited and appointed by the king as a regular singer at the palace.” (25). It is generally held that, “Habba Khatoon is the first significant name in Kashmiri poetry after Lal Ded and Nunda Ryosh (Sheikh-ul-Alam). She was the first romantic poetess and the most important *vatsun* writer—a pioneer in this field. Not that she invented the form; she breathed new life into it” (Raina 29). At a very young age, she was sent to *madrassa* (school) where she was taught Persian and also studied the holy Quran. Trained in the simple art of reading and writing she embarked on a lyrical journey of writing ‘*Lol*’ poetry. The term ‘*Lol*’ does not exactly mean the English word ‘love’ but is a complex feeling of longing, love, and homesickness. The closest English stylistic similarity to *Lol* poems is borne by romantic lyric poetry. It conveys one brief thought, and is full of melody and love. It is a loose lyric, and a longer poem compared to a *vaakh*. Her brand of romantic poetry and her *lol* did not exist in the earlier Kashmiri poetic tradition of mysticism. Comparing the poetic style of Lalla Ded and Habba Khatoon, Professor G. R. Malik in an article, “A Brief Survey of Kashmiri Literature” writes:

Habba Khatoon's sweet lyrics mark the second great milestone after Lalla Ded of the evolution of Kashmiri poetry with the difference that she uses the *vatsun* form (the most common lyrical form in Kashmiri) instead of the *vakh*. Indeed this form, with obvious folk origins, came to be established firmly as the main poetic form in Kashmir through Habba Khatoon, the Sappho of Kashmir. (2)

An Ecocritical study of the poetry of Emily Bronte and Habba Khatoon would not necessarily reject the existing Humanist and Feminist analyses of their texts, each of which has attempted to interpret the text in terms of their own concerns. Rather, such a study would look to integrate these into its own critical system. The poetry of Emily Bronte is a treasure for an Ecocritical reading, for example, see this extract from Emily Bronte's poem, "A Day Dream":

And Why should we be glad at all?

The leaf is hardly green,

Before a token of its fall

on the surface seen! (Bronte, Emily 9)

The loss of greenery and the fall of a leaf becomes the subject of this poetic musing. It is a sort of mourning for the loss of a symbolic leaf, which represents the environment around Emily. She depicts the sadness which arises from loss to an ecological entity, that is, a leaf, which serves as a site of production. This literariness of the fall of the leaf takes symbolic connotations when related to human life. In another poem, "A Little While, a Little While", Emily employs an imagery replete with the objects of nature and environment. To give a voice to her feelings, she writes:

There is a spot, mild barren hills,

Where winter howls, and driving rain;
But if the dreary tempest chills,
There is a light that warns again.
The house is old, the trees are bare,
Moonless above bends twilight's dome;
But what on earth is half so dear,
So longed for, as the hearth of home? (Bronte, Emily 5)

She does not stop here, but brings in the existence of earth to give a more vivid description of human/animal life with nature. In a poetic verse, she sings the relationship between man and nature, and points towards a sort of stability and equilibrium between life/environment as:

A heaven so clear, an earth so calm,
So sweet, so soft, so hushed an air;
And, deepening still the dream-like charm,
Wild moor-sheep feeding everywhere. (Bronte, Emily 5)

The same imagery of nature and its relevance to human experiences is also seen in Anne's poetry. Her poetry seems to put nature and man relationship via spiritual spins. Like, in one of her poems, "A Hymn", equating the environmental objects to Divinity, she sings:

Eternal power of earth and air,
Unseen, yet seen in all around,
Remote, but dwelling everywhere,
Though silent, heard in every sound.

If e'er thine ear in mercy bent
When wretched mortals cried to thee,
And if indeed thy Son was sent
To save lost sinners such as me. (Bronte, Anne 13)

Habba Khatoon also employs images of nature to address her marginalised and oppressed position. Like, in one of her poems “*pompury gath*” (“The Moth and the Flame”), she depicts her condition as:

lājy phulai anda vanan
tsě kanan goi na myon
lājy phulai kwola saran
vwothoo neeryan khasavo
phōjy yosman anda vanan
tsě kanan goi naa myon

The distant meadows are in bloom—

Have you not heard my call?

Flowers bloom on mountain lakes,

The upland meadows call us loud,

The lilac blooms in distant woods.

Have you not heard my call? (Raina 47)

She also brings in the names of flowers and birds to draw a contrast between her own deteriorating life and the processes of nature. She sings this human condition by employing natural settings as:

ratshi ratshi retakol chum soraanai

bara maa gatshan achhi posh

kuni hita bulbulo yita aki aanai

chhaav myaāny̐ daānai posh

With summer steadily on the wane,

These champa flowers soon may wither—

O bulbul, be here before they fade!

Enjoy my pomegranate blossoms! (49)

In her poem “*lola zar*” (“Love’s Anguish”), Habba Khatoon talks about the harshness of nature which can cause pain to human life; she talks about this so as to show the unkind and arrogant attitude of her lover. To put across this condition of love-wreck, she says:

tula katur lōgum pohai

haarūny̐ taapan zaāj nas

joyan laājnas dohai

yyēm̐y̐ bū dohai gaājnas

He bared me to midwinter frost,

Let the summer sun scorch me dry,

Made me wander like a wayward stream:

He makes me languish night and day. (57)

In the same song, she employs the image of a human act which is at the base of the destruction and devastation of ecological balance. The intervention of human beings as tormentors of nature is put across in an artistic manner, and all this actually points towards the stubbornness of Habba Khatoon’s lover towards her.

path naiyan aāsūs bū hai

tōtuy votum tabardaar

ganyan kōrnam tohai

yēm̀ỳ bū dohai gaajnas

I was a happy greenwood pine.

Till this callous woodsman chopped me down

And burnt each piece to ashes!

He makes me languish night and day. (57)

All the poetic verses represented in this paper have a sort of link to the elements and processes of nature. These sing the entities of the environment and depict ecology, either in a balanced calm pose, or in a horrific avenging mode. Though my visualization seems to be farsighted but this study covers up the issues which come under an Ecocritical study of a text. The thrust has been to trace-out the anthropocentric view as against ecology. It focuses on the issue, how man eulogies his self(ish)ness to dominate and exploit nature. It also covers up the signs of ecological fragility due to human nature. Reactions, if any, on the part of nature are also dealt. Another strand to be taken into cognizance is that of “Eco-feminism”, which assumes how like nature, woman is being constructed, stereotyped, marginalized, dominated and exploited. It also draws a comparison between the sensitivity of human-beings towards the ecology and environment. How male psyche deals with the surrounding ecological factors and what is the role of a female persona towards nature. After all this ecocritical discussion, to find the formula for a non-violent solution to world problems in all such texts will be a treat to watch, since Eco-feminists uphold peace as the only solution to world problems. So, under the ecocritical study of Emily Bronte and Habba Khatoon, the query of the Eco-feminists, ‘What is our place in Nature?’, will never be so easy to answer.

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