

Life Returns in Desert– A Green Approach to *The Man Who Planted Trees* By Jean Giono

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Abstract

The present century is the century of the environmental disorder. The severe cyclonic storms like *Mora*, *Aila*, *Hudhud* and *Laila*, the frequent earthquake worldwide, the devastating Tsunami of Chennai, the flash flood of Uttarakhand, the landslide of Kalimpong, the great flood of Kashmir – all these have left a terrible impact on man. So ecocriticism which studies, literature through the green lens is a very relevant theory that tends to explore the relationship between literature and the physical environment. But this is not merely the study of nature as represented in literature. It examines the wider significance of nature from “environmentalist praxis.”(Buell) If ‘ecocriticism’ is environmental activism, the present paper seeks to study Jean Giono’s *The Man Who Planted Trees* from an earth- centric approach. In a tale of only about 4000 words the story teller here shows the desperate effort of a man who indulges in tree plantation in a desert land to bring back life into it. The long prose narrative beautifully depicts how an individual attempt may bring about an effective change in an environment that was turned to desert.

Keywords: Man, Trees, Nature, Ecocriticism, Desert, Life.

1. Introduction

Our mother earth is the only planet known to have life forms. It is believed that the earth was very hot when it was newly formed. There were no plants or animals on it. Later, there were rains and thunderstorms to cool it down. Slowly an atmosphere wrapped the earth and living forms like plants and animals started appearing it. Our earth has air, land and water, which are necessary for all living things. We get light and heat from the sun that helps plants and animals to grow. The early humans began staying in groups. Together they started hunting animals for food. Living in groups helped them to fight fierce animals, to face natural threats like storms, thunder, floods, droughts, etc. These made them think of shelter and safety for which they began to discover the ways of better living. They started inventing tools, discovered fire, made wheels and created a civilized world. From stone-age to iron-age, they were more or less eco-centric. But as soon as they got advanced in technology, they started to

dominate nature. From industrial revolution to the present cyber age man has, as though, forgotten to protect the nonhuman world. His anthropocentric vision guides him to tame nature for his own comfort. But he fails to remember that he is a part of this environment, everything is connected to everything. Nature is not a silent spectator. She is a potent force who might react in global warming, climate change, acid rain, toxic effect, etc. creating a threat to our very existence on earth.

The Man is the creation of a long-term process of evolution. He is a rational being well aware of the fact that a good number of animal species have become extinct and a few others have become endangered. Our ecology will be at stake if we think of ourselves only without paying any attention to the well-being of the nonhuman world. Herein lays the importance of Green studies or ecocriticism. The so called Industrial Revolution in Europe and in many other continents cast havoc on the natural world. Therefore, the Romantic writers responded to Rousseau's call of 'Return to Nature'. They first highlighted man-nature relationship as a never falling bond. The ecocritics gave a new form to nature study.

2. Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a fairly new field of literary study with a special attention to the significance of nature in literature. Although it got a literary shape during the 90's (with the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, 1996), within a short span of two and a half decade this revisionist movement sprouted into a banyan tree. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "...the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies." (*The Ecocriticism Reader*, XVIII). Peter Barry writes- "For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it" (*Beginning Theory*). The term 'ecocriticism' was used first by William Rueckert in his critical essay "Literature and ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism". Here Rueckert defines ecocriticism as the application of ecology and ecological principles to the scholarly study of literary works. Ecology means the scientific study about the relationship between the air, land, water, animals, plants, etc. while ecocriticism considers human as a part of environment and studies interconnection between man and nature.

In the words of historian Donald Worster, "We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding." The ecocritical works share a common understanding and motivation

that our environment is at margin and human atrocities are mostly responsible for the damage of the earth's ecosystem that support life-forms. Ecocritical work directly intervenes in the present global matters like social, political, and economic issues related to the environmental pollution and the protection of our ecosphere for a sustainable future of mankind. The UK lens of green literature calls ecocriticism as "Green Studies" while the US lens calls it ecocriticism.

The Green Movement was initiated with the publication of two highly influential books, both put into print in the year 1996. The first work which is known as the 'Bible' of ecoliterature is *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. The second work is *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. Ecocriticism draws its bearing from the works of three great American writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson enjoyed the impact of nature in his first reflect essay "Nature". Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes, During 1843* encounters the American landscape at large. Thoreau's *Walden* "is an with is two years stay from 1845, in a hut he had built on the shore of Walden Pond, a couple of miles away from his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. It is, perhaps, the classic account of dropping out of modern life and seeking to renew the self by a 'return to nature' -this is certainly a book which has always exerted a strong effect on the attitudes of its readers." (Barry). Thoreau wrote, - "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." -- *Walden* (1854)

Ecocritics ask questions like-

- i) What does 'Nature' represent in the essay? Can you interpret it within an ecocritical framework?
- ii) Which 'What role does nature and the landscape play here? image' or 'symbolic representation' of nature does the author construct?
- iii) How do nature and human emotion relate to each other in the text? How does nature affect emotion?
- iv) What is the relationship between humans and the environment in this text? Is the environment commodified?
- v) How does a literary work can build up ecological wisdom?
- vi) Do men write about nature differently than women do?
- vii) Is nature a metaphor of life?
- viii) How the environmental crisis is being represented in literature?

Ecocriticism is now growing like a banyan tree. Within two and half decade of its appearance, it has come out as an organized movement. Although nature remains the centre of attraction of writers down the ages, not such gusto was felt as it is now after the global environmental issues come to light. More and more ecocritics are getting interested and engaged in this field. They read works of literature through a green lens from with reference to nature in them. In an age of environmental crisis, they try to present brainstorm possible solution to the current environmental crisis like ‘Greenhouse effect’, ‘Acid rain’, ‘environmental pollution’, ‘deforestation’, ‘toxic effects’ etc. Though an ecocritic is not a national leader or policy maker who can impose laws in controlling environmental troubles, he can certainly create an ecological awareness among his readers making correction of the anthropocentric behavior of man which is mostly responsible for such degradation. “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 in a perpetual dance. Put simply Literature acts on people, and people act on the world. Ecocritics agree that people have been and are presently acting badly on the world and that, consequently, the world is in a bad way.(Litanies of environmental ills, from toxic and nuclear waste, to destruction of the rain forests, to global warming, to loss of topsoil, to high rates of extinction, to degraded habitat are a hallmark of ecocriticism.) What ecocritics wonder is how Literature may bring about healthful actions, and what role literary criticism may play in the process.”-says Glotfelty in his essay “The Strong Green Thread”. Lawrence Buell finds two phases of this environmental criticism. ‘The first wave ecocriticism’ is meant for the celebration nature. On the other hand, ‘the second wave ecocriticism’ is popularly known as “the revisionist ecocriticism”. According to the first wave,

“environment effectively meant ‘natural environment.’ In practice if not in principle, the realms of the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’ looked more disjunct than they have come to seem for more recent environmental critics – one of the reasons for preferring ‘environmental criticism’ to ‘ecocriticism’ as more indicative of present practice. Ecocriticism was initially understood to be synchronous with the aims of earthcare.” (Buell 21)

The first wave ecocritics explore “nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction”(Buell 138). Where the first-wave ecocritics used to uphold the philosophy of life-forms; the second wave ecocritics insisted on environmental protection in view of the threats and dangers of environmental degradation. At present Ecocriticism has got the momentum worldwide; writers from the East to the West contribute to the field.

There are three popular models of ecocriticism,

- a) Domination Model (Anthropocentric -Humans dominate the environment)
- b) Care-taking Model (Still anthropocentric-It positions humans as caretakers of the earth)

c) Bio-centric Model (It rejects anthropocentric views and explores connectedness of all living and non-living things.)

The present paper investigates an in-depth study of the concerned essay in the light of all the three models.

3. An Ecocritical Evaluation of *The Man Who Planted Trees*

The Man Who Planted Trees was first published in American Magazine *Vogue* in 1954 as “Man Who Planted Hope and Grew Happiness”. The 4000 words long tale faithfully depicts how Elzeard Bouffier the shepherd, planted thousands of trees single-handedly in a country which was dying for the lack of trees. Within a very short time, the work got translated into many languages and inspired reforestation efforts worldwide. Bouffier, as Giono says, is a fictional character who has been created as a role model for people to love the trees or more precisely to make them aware planting more trees. This can be a better solution to the problem of deforestation due to the ruthless cutting of trees by man. The short fiction is a powerful message to humanity that if we love and protect nature, she will nourish us and sustain us. Over four or more decades, Bouffier strives hard to plant trees in a desolate land which gradually turns to be a Garden of Eden. And in the end, the desert valley becomes vibrant with life and human habitation there is peacefully settled.

There are only a few people who do not set the track of their life in the self-same rail. These unusual people catch the attention of the multitude, especially when they work for the benevolence of mankind. Such a person is Elzeard Bouffier first having lost his only son, and then his beloved wife, preferred a retired life of solitude. He took immense pleasure in living a tranquil life, with his flock of sheep and his dog. Having found nothing more important in life he resolved to remedy the grim situation of his environment. The narrator, while taking a long trip in the ancient region where the Alps thrust down into Provence had a chance to peep into his selfless activity. The storyteller embarked upon his long walk during 1910 through the desolate regions which were barren and colourless. The only life form there he saw was the wild lavender in the midst of a desert valley. There was no trace of civilization except old, empty, crumbling building that proclaimed the trace of civilized people a long ago. The dry well, too, symbolize that there were life forms in full bloom. The June sunlight hitting his heat oppressed brain drove him to find water in such an arid land where the wind blew with unbearable ferocity and growled like a lion disturbed during its meal. After walking hours after hours in the land of dryness, he happened to meet a shepherd living a lonely life with his thirty sheep. He provided the narrator with sweet water from a deep natural well, quite unexpected in a barren country. The shepherd had strived hard to make his dwelling place in order in the desert of an utmost disorder. The man shared his soup with the narrator. His every step has created an eco-friendly atmosphere. He disliked smoking, therefore, he summarily rejected the tobacco pouch offered by the narrator, he used pollution free technology (winch) to pull water from the well, He even earns his livelihood by rearing sheep. In short, he lived a life of unparalleled desolation in a climate extremely harsh both in winter and in summer. Although the wind on the tiles of

his house made the sound of roaring sea waves, he himself remained silent. He had a care for animals. Apart from his thirty sheep he had a dog as quiet as himself and as friendly as him without being cruel to others. And in spite of the adversity of his surroundings, he engaged himself patiently in reforming the land in close contact with nature.

Therefore, the ecology of the place was at stake. This is obviously due to warfare which ravished France during the two world wars. This might also be due to some human atrocities. Whatever may be the reason, the human habitation was getting violated due to the ruthless environment. And as there was little sustenance of life the few people living in scattered villages on these mountain slopes lived in abject misery. Giono writes in the book:

“There was rivalry in everything over the piece of charcoal as well as over a pew in the church, over warring virtues as over warring vices as well as over the ceaseless combat between virtues and vice. And over all there was the wind also ceaseless, to rasp upon the nerves. There were epidemics of suicide and frequent cases of insanity, usually homicide.” (6)

So the shepherd is a striking contrast to the few other villagers who used to live in turmoil. The narrator felt peace being with him as he finds in nature. Unlike the charcoal burners, he is a preserver of nature. He had collected a pile of acorns, selected the matured ones for plantation. Nothing could startle his patience of planting thousands of oak trees by strenuous job thrashing iron rod into the earth for making holes and planting acorns one by one. Although the land was not his, he supposed it as a benevolent work for community of people, perhaps who cared nothing about the land. Yet he planted his acorns with great care. His ten thousand Oaks were magnificent for the narrator, but ‘if God granted him life, in thirty years he would have planted so many trees, that these ten thousand would be like a drop of water in the ocean’(10). But Bouffier did not stop planting trees only; he took a good care of them so that they can survive:

“The seedlings, which he had protected from his sheep with a wire fence, were very beautiful.”(10)

As a result, when the narrator, an infantryman by profession, after having a relief from the first world war revisited the land again to get a fresh lease of life got astonished at the sight of the ten years old plants-

“I was literally speechless and as he did not talk, we spent the whole day walking in silence through the forest. In three sections, it measured eleven kilometers at its greatest width.”(11)

What strikes the soldier most is that the idea of beautifying desert came to a single man who made it possible without any help from others. The shepherd’s lifelong efforts of reforesting the land of destruction proved him to be as effectual as God. He also planted Beech trees as delicate as young girls. The narrator now found brooks flowing with

water. These had been dry since the memory of man. Creation came in a chain reaction. The wind scattered seeds in a normal way. As water reappeared, natural vegetation flourished with willows, rushes, meadows, gardens, flowers etc.

But this sort of transformation of the land (from desert to a garden) took place very slowly. It seemed as a part of the natural design without catching anyone's astonishment. People moved to the land very frequently now. Hunters started climbing into the wild in search of hares and wild boars. They attributed the gradual growth of the plants to the natural caprice of the earth. What is more interesting is that Bouffier never made a display of his work. That is why when a delegation team from the Government came over to examine the place they could not identify the mystery behind the 'natural forest' until the narrator revealed it to one of the forestry officers of the delegation who was his friend. The entire forest land was taken under the protection of the state and charcoal burning was strictly forbidden there. Bouffier had, of course, some initial obstacles. He had to fight against bleak despair before gaining confidence. Once he planted more than ten thousand maple saplings and none of them survived. Next year instead of maple he planted beech plants that sprout up better than oak. In short, he learned from his life that only perseverance will achieve ultimate success.

The sea change of the desert land was noticed by the narrator when he met Bouffier again for the ultimate time in June 1945. Despite the disorder of France due to WW2, the mountain got better transportation. About 1000 people moved there, all of whom unknowingly owing their happiness to Bouffier whose selfless deeds brought about in the physical environment and culture of the land. The people who were guilty of the savage culture hating one another have now transformed into better humans. The narrator says-

"Most amazing of all, I heard the actual sound of water falling into a pool. I saw that a fountain had been built, that it had flowed freely and what touched me most that someone had planted a linden beside it, linden that must have been four years old, already in full leaf, the incontestable symbol of resurrection."(22)

So, hope had returned the place, the ruins cleared away. The newly built up houses, freshly plastered appeared among the green pasture. There were fruits and vegetables, flowers and leaves, cabbages and roses, leeks and snapdragons etc. On the lower slopes of the mountains barley and rye got cultivated. The meadows were turning green and the old streams got fed by the rains and snows that the forest conserved. The number of inhabitants increased and people got married. The story teller here gives a vivid picture of the village rejuvenating to life again-

"Little by little, the villages have been rebuilt. People from the plains, where life is costly, have settled here, bringing youth, motion, and the spirit of adventure. Along the roads, you meet hearty men and women, boys and girls who understand laughter and have recovered a taste for the picnics. Counting the former population, unrecognizable now that they live in comfort, more than ten thousand people owe their happiness to Elzeard Bouffier"(23)

Thus, we see the effects of nature on human culture. When nature revives with her beautiful gifts for mankind, the misery of life removes and people live in peace and harmony. Nature gives and takes away and gives again-this wider significance of nature was well understood by Bouffier. His tireless attempts of afforestation were not a mere pastime like stamp collecting. He had an affectionate care for the land that was dying for the lack of plant. The two world wars had no effect on his devoted work. Although the whole world got engaged in destructive warfare, he remained undisturbed continuing his benevolent work in a silent manner.

4. Conclusion

Therefore, *The Man Who Planted Trees* is an ecocritical story by Giono that is 'speaking a word for nature'. It strikes at the very base of ecological crisis. It truly depicts how the biosphere which is our home is getting disturbed by human culture (e.g. Cutting oak, indulging in warfare that disturbs the natural environment of a place, etc.). At the same time, it shows how a single person can carry out, all by himself, a laborious task of beautifying nature to protect environmental degradation. If there are thousands of Bouffiers, the present environmental issues will be resolved without much difficulty. The essay is committed to creating an ecological awareness among the readers who are pursued of their anthropocentric attitude. The focus of the story is not class, gender, psychology, society etc. as we find in other literary theories. It is based on an earth centric approach where there is a bond between the human and the non-human. The work has a purgative redemptive effect on humanity by manifesting an ecological vision for the benevolence of mankind in general. The story is praiseworthy for its affirmation of life, even in the state of abject misery. Elzeard Bouffier's simple living, the struggle for existence, above all, love of nature for the restoration of life imparts a good lesson to Humanity that if we love nature she will nourish us. Indeed Wordsworth is right in saying:

"Nature never did betray

The heart that loved her" (*Tintern Abbey*, 122-3)

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