Chapter - V

Conclusion

“The earth is what we all have in common.”

(Wendell Berry)

Environmental crisis is believed to be “a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which,” according to Buell, “depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity’s relation to it” (2). The ecocritical study of Robert Frost was taken up in the present thesis with an intention to find out Frost’s perception of the natural world and insights his poetry offers into man’s relationship with the natural world around (both “natural” and “non-natural” world). The study has been pursued with an aim to see if his poetry formulates for the readers “an ecological poetics” and promotes amongst them “an ecological vision”. The ecocritical perusal of Frost’s poetry shows that he is an ecologically-oriented writer whose perception, conception and representation of the natural world — all are ecological.

Frost’s poetry reveals that, for him, nature is a reality, not a creation of mind or language. Language does help in making the natural phenomena comprehensible but it cannot be used as Oscar Wilde used it “to teach Nature her proper place” (qtd. in Bagby, Preface xii). In his poetry, Frost has accorded nature its rightful place. No doubt, Frost has shown in his poetry that language can lead to the domination of nature as man continuously makes efforts to give it a form in words. The subjectivity of man, along with his anthropocentric attitude, finds its way into his representation of nature. Nature is, in the process, pushed to the background. Frost, however, also shows that the domination of nature is not possible. He shows in his poems that nature
resists man’s efforts to bind it within a narrative; it refuses to be subdued by man by letting him assume that all the natural phenomena can be put in words or explained through language. In fact, there are certain things in nature which can never be comprehended by man. Nature’s resistance to narrative in his poems shows not just the failure of human effort to give a form to nature but it also speaks of the power of the nonhuman world.

Frost also acknowledges that the natural world possesses a language of its own which is incomprehensible to man. This brings nature on par with man in his poetry and opens up the scope to extend moral consideration to the nonhuman world in the realm of environmental ethics where nature has been denied moral standing because of it being a silent subject. One of the ways in which the traditional western ethics have assigned a greater intrinsic value to human beings than to any other nonhuman thing is through the faculty of language. Language has definitely played a very important role in determining the relational mores between man and nature. Man accords a moral status only to the privileged speakers in his circle and nature is denied that moral status because “nature is silent in Western discourse”. Man himself has been responsible for silencing nature by arrogating to himself the responsibility to speak for nature. This has led to the exploitation of nature at the hands of man. Frost accepts the nonhuman others as “alinguistic agents,” and, in his poetry, he not only recognizes but also safeguards the interests of the nonhuman world. As opposed to the Western ethical system and philosophy that have been highly anthropocentric, he designates an important place to nature and brings it on par with humanity in his poetry. It points towards the presence of bioethics in his poetry. Bioethics is the key
aspect of ecocentricism in which there is a strong sense of respect for nature in its own right.

Frost’s poetry “renews and revivifies” the reader’s experience of the natural world. The natural world in Frost’s poetry not only exists on a different plane than that of man but it is also indifferent to man. It exists on its own terms and conditions in which man has no say. When man, less in his ignorance and more due to his arrogance, tries to usurp the place of nature, nature offers resistance; sometimes by resisting the narrative and sometimes by reclaiming its lost territory. Learning “to live with the ‘strangeness’ of nature, with the fact that natural processes are entirely indifferent to our existence and welfare – not positively indifferent, of course, but incapable of caring about us – and are complex in a way,” according to Passmore, “rules out the possibility of our wholly mastering and transforming them” (137-138). Frost’s poetry has done exactly that. By revealing “nature’s incandescent strangeness,” Frost rules out the chances/possibility of man’s domination over nature.

The study of Frost’s poetry reveals that the human history is very much implicated in the natural history, so much so that it is difficult to sever the two. In his poetry, besides the “natural nature,” Frost has also presented a natural world with which human beings interact in their daily life. As a matter of convenience, that natural world has been called environment in the present thesis. 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. The stoic character of the Yankees and their resistance to change in Frost’s poetry is found to be result of the hard landscape they are placed in. That landscape also teaches its people how to lead a life in accordance with the demands of the environment in order to make their
survival possible. The nonhuman environment, the New England region in case of Frost, is, thus, not just restricted to playing the role of a setting to the human drama in his poetry, rather it becomes an active participant in it, guiding the life and attitude of the people who are dependent on it and draw their sustenance from it. Frost has, in fact, accorded the New England “the pride of place” that Buell expects should be given to a place in the environmental imagination.

The realistic description of the New England environment in Frost’s poetry, studied closely, brings before the readers the social and environmental history of New England. His poetry reveals the transition of New England from countryside to an industrial town. He does not “distort and demystify the social and environmental history” even in his use of the pastoral trope in his poetry. The convention of pastoral held the Industrial Revolution responsible for man’s alienation from nature. Frost, in his pastorals, has drawn a balance between the two contrastive worlds and presented both the worlds authentically. Frost gives a faithful portrayal of the New England life as it emerges in the wake of intrusion of industry and technology. He also shows in his poetry how certain vernacular artefacts, abandoned farms and barns for example, which are seen as the intrusion of culture in nature, are, in fact, records of the social and environmental history of a particular place. Studied closely, these artefacts have an environmental story to tell — the story of New England’s transition from countryside to an industrial town.

Frost’s poetry is dotted with instances that show that nature and culture, which hardly came close in Cartesian dualism, have intermingled in his poetry. For example, the trope of pastoral has usually shown the dominance of nature over culture. However, it has taken a new form in Frost’s poetry. Frost upholds neither nature nor
culture; he does not try to show the prominence of one over the other. Rather, he offers a middle ground in his poetry where an interaction between nature and culture is possible. Leo Marx has talked about the "middle landscape," which can settle "the contradiction between rural myth and technological fact" (qtd. in Garrard 49). Frost, in a few of his poems, suggests such a "middle landscape" — a place between nature on the one hand and civilization on the other. In Frost's poetic world, nature and culture, in the form of industry and technology, exist side by side. While seated at a "vantage point," the character in his poetry can look whichever way he wishes to when he is tired of one or the other. The characters in some of Frost's poems get tired of the natural world also.

Frost accepted technology as a part of life of the characters in his poems, but his poetry also reveals another aspect of his attitude towards science, which, in its practical form, transforms into technology. In a few of his poems, Frost has pointed towards the destructive form that science can take. This, however, does not show that he was against science. It was the monism of science that he feared. Monism in science drew a heavy line between matter and spirit and denied the presence of spirit in the natural world. Frost felt that it led to "a wholly mechanistic conception of human nature and the physical universe." He, therefore, doubted if science could ever be the basis of a sound civilization as many people in his time believed it could. This attitude of Frost is in compliance with the environmental thought of the Deep ecologists who also find that the denial of spirit to nature has led to its exploitation at the hands of man who mistook it for a commodity to be exploited.

Frost's poetry admits the independence of nature and accepts the fact that things go on in their own complex ways in nature. The best way he suggests is to
leave nature to itself. That is one way. But the characters in Frost’s poetry, because they have to make a living out of the land they live in, are in continuous interaction with nature. In such circumstances, they are guided by certain ethics. The ethics guiding the life of people in Frost’s poetic world are similar to the “land ethics” of Aldo Leopold which binds all the elements of the environment in a community. Frost has depicted in his poetry a sense of community with the nonhuman world, which includes the elements of nature from where the people draw their sustenance. His sense of community envelopes domesticated as well as wild (as opposed to domesticated, not necessarily ferocious) animals in its fold. The sense of community that Frost accords to the nonhuman world in his poetry justifies the extension of moral consideration to the nonhuman world.

Frost’s poetry reveals the pragmatic environmentalist approach. In his poetry we come across the two forms of environmentalism — preservationism and conservationism. These two thoughts have guided the American Conservation policy. Preservationism emphasizes the moral, spiritual, aesthetic, and biocentric rationales for the environment and calls for the complete protection of specific areas based solely on their intrinsic value and not on their future usefulness as economic resources. There are both conservationist and preservationist streaks in many of Frost’s poems. The characters in his poetry leave certain things in nature to take their own course. And, in case they have to take something from nature, they take only that much which can satisfy their need. If seen from the present perspective, they believe in sustainable development and all the actions of the characters in Frost’s poetry are directed towards drawing from nature only for their need and not their greed.
Frost’s poetry draws a contrast between the attitudes of the natives and the outsiders towards the environment. This lends strength to the ecocritical study of Frost’s poetry because it brings out the relationship of the people with their place. The way the world is perceived determines the way it is treated. This is perhaps what Lynn White, Jr. meant when he claimed that “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (9). The way the natives look at their environment is different from that of the outsiders, and, therefore, their treatment of the environment is also different. However, by adapting themselves to the natural environment of a particular place and by assimilating themselves into the culture and ethics of a place, in Buell’s opinion, even the outsiders can become natives through their “reinhabitation”. This is well exemplified in Frost’s poetry where some of the outsiders do become the natives. Similarly, some of the natives also become outsiders due to their alienation from their environment.

In Frost’s poetic world, environmental education plays an important role. In his poetry, he shows how it starts early in life as it is made a part of the children’s life. Their imagination is kept alive by telling them stories of nature. They are also given a free hand to learn things practically on their own. This perhaps also explains why some of the characters in Frost’s world distrust formal education because for them a man must have the knowledge of his immediate environment which is attained only by living and working in proximity with one’s environment. The environmental education gained in the early part of life helps the children later on to imbibe the ethics of the land and thus act responsibly towards their environment.

So, whether it is the dependence of the natives on natural things that makes them treat their environment sensibly or it is their ethical system that determines their
actions towards the natural world, the people in Frost’s poetic world extend a rightful place to nature. “The extension of human morality to the non-human world,” according to Love, “suggests that the time is past due for a redefinition of what is significant on earth. In our thinking, the challenge that faces us in these terms is to outgrow our notion that human beings are so special that the earth exists for our comfort and disposal alone” (229). The characters in Frost’s poetry have no such illusions about themselves and the environment in which they live. They acknowledge and accept their dependence on the natural world for their survival. At the same time, they know the limits of their land, which they try to use justifiably.

The perusal of Frost’s poetry shows that he has successfully integrated the stories of nature with human stories and in doing so he has moved beyond certain narrow concepts of nature. First of all, by presenting the true picture of nature in the wilderness, Frost has broken the myth of the sublimity of the wilderness. He presents the natural world as he sees it, with all its evil and wildness. He does not try to gloss over the unpleasant reality of nature, which had been the case with much of the writings about nature. He depicts nature as it is: totally indifferent to man, which, at times, resists man’s efforts to dominate it through words as well as destroy it through his actions. Such a picture of nature can help reframe the environmental crisis not in terms of “human artifice versus pristine nature” but rather as “a dichotomy to be resolved between human domination and that which is wild and free.”

Frost has also moved beyond the narrow conception of nature as depicted in the conventional pastorals. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the ecocritical study of his pastorals has led towards a new revised form of pastoral. Ecocriticism is looking forward to a more realistic philosophy of nature that can do justice to the
scientific themes of the ecological movement. Frost, in his pastorals, has blasted a few myths about the natural world which are in compliance with the science of ecology. He does not portray in his poems a natural world which is static. His depiction of nature in his pastorals is more scientific, reasonable and much in keeping with the present times. Frost’s pastoral, which does not adhere to the idea that sees “nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies” (Garrard 56), can serve as the new version of pastoral.

In 1955, Frost said, “the most satisfying part is to write a poem. The next most satisfying is to have people read them.... and to see poems turn up in quotations, become part of people’s lives. Maybe turn up in a Presidential campaign” (Gilbert). Little could Frost have expected that even more than half a century later, his poetry would be approached with an aim to find out whether his poetry formulates for the readers “an ecological poetics” and promotes amongst them “an ecological vision.” The study of Frost’s poetry from the ecocritical perspective reveals that, however “modest eco-precociousness” Frost may have started with, he succeeded in his environmental quest and attained environmental literacy, the examples of which abound in his poetry. His poetry formulates a reasonable “ecological poetics” which defies many myths about nature and is in stride with the present times and situation; it is scientific also. His poetic text promotes “an ecological vision” that can be helpful in various fields of action such as environmental education, sustainable development, conservation and most importantly environmental ethics.