CONCLUSION

A NEW VISION FOR A TIRED PLANET

The nature consciousness that is innate in all human beings inevitably finds expression in the writings of contemporary nature writers when they attempt to portray their experiences and perceptions of nature. An analysis of the depiction of this nature consciousness in the ‘green’ tradition of American literature highlights the environmental concerns of ecocriticism. In this interdisciplinary study an ecocritical mode of enquiry has been conducted to examine how nature is portrayed in the writings of five major contemporary American writers – Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, Bill McKibben and Annie Dillard – in order to explore the vital link between literature and the physical environment as expressed in the interplay of language and environment in literature. Such a study not only affords a better understanding of the natural world but also enables us as humans to develop a more holistic vision of a global society that consists of the human, non-human life forms and the physical environment.

The significance of the ecocritical study of literature is that it can aid and abet the environmental movement by sensitizing human beings about the necessity of an ecologically sustainable way of life. Portraying the earth as a planet in crisis and creating fear and guilt in human minds about an imminent apocalypse may not be effective in the present situation. What our overexploited and tired planet requires is a new ecophilosphy to restore the health of its biosphere.
In order to develop this new ecophilosophy, ‘green psychology’ or ecopsychology is extremely advantageous. Ecopsychology, quite contrary to the traditional way of perceiving the human psyche as an isolated entity, views it as intimately related to the planet. The basic assumption of ecopsychology is that the intimate and symbiotic relationship between the human psyche and the earth makes the health of the human beings and the health of the planet essentially interdependent. This ecological wisdom that emphasizes an inherent sense of reciprocity is supposed to be a part of the ‘ecological unconscious’ of the human psyche. Ecopsychologists contend that the reawakening of the ‘ecological unconscious’ can instill in human minds a sense of ethical responsibility towards fellow human beings and the planet. Thus green psychology can strengthen the awareness about the bond of love and loyalty that is innate in the human psyche.

The contemporary American literature that deals with environment exhibits the influence of social movements like the environment movement on the creative minds of the writers. It is quite surprising and interesting to note the close similarity between the views of these contemporary American writers with the basic assumptions of ecopsychology.

A salient feature of ecopsychology is the belief that human beings can link their selves to the natural world in order to strengthen the human psyche’s intimate bond with the planet. Re-establishing the ecological identity by the process of broadening the self can bring about a transformation in the human attitude to nature. This paradigm shift may destroy the irrational forces in the human psyche that cause the ecocidal activities of human beings. The contemporary American
literature on nature too exhibits a great awareness about the role of self in defining the human dimension in relation to nature. The nature experiences of the writers chosen for this study exemplify their personal sense of connection with nature. The writings of Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, and Wendell Berry describe how the human self is nourished when it is integrated with nature. Annie Dillard, on the contrary, forgets her identity when her self is completely merged with nature. Like ecopsychologists, these writers too advocate the need to heal the alienated human self by linking it with the self of the universe so that humanity may learn to care for its environment.

Wilderness which is often considered a touchstone of American identity is another common link between ecopsychology and the writings of contemporary American writers on environment. Ecopsychology perceives wilderness as the source of the human psyche from which the urban-industrial culture has alienated it. The wilderness therapy that is often practiced by ecopsychologists is based on the their conviction that reconnecting the human psyche to wild nature can provide positive and transformative experiences that are potent enough to create a powerful sensory aliveness and alertness. This state can cause a change in modern man’s attitude to nature. The contemporary American writers too perceive wilderness as a rational, spiritual and psychological dimension of nature which needs to be preserved. While emphasizing the regenerative power of nature these writers view the wild either as a refuge or as an arena that provides physical and psychological nourishment. Writers like Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry believe in maintaining a harmony between the wild and the domestic by incorporating the wild into their
workplaces, while Edward Abbey and Bill McKibben advocate preserving the pristine wilderness untouched by human beings. The wild nature that Annie Dillard explores is an amazing world that exists on the margin of the domestic landscape; it helps her merge her ‘self’ into the ‘self’ of the universe.

The dichotomy between the world of human culture and the world of nature is often criticized by contemporary nature writers as well as by ecopsychologists as a reason for the humanity’s alienation from nature which is our actual home. The world of human culture despite all its achievements and assumed glory is alienated from its prime source, that is, the natural surroundings. Ecopsychologists trace the human alienation from nature either to the beginning of agriculture or to the Industrial Revolution and consider the traumatic experiences of modern man to be the consequence of this alienation.

The rift with nature is aggravated by modern man’s anthropocentric perception of the reality as human-constructed. Both the ecopsychologists and contemporary American writers express their concern about the culture-nature dichotomy and advocate biocentrism as the most appropriate ethical point of view that humanity should adopt in order to inculcate a sense of respect for nature and a desire in human minds to lead a harmonious life with fellow human and non-human inhabitants of the planet.

Ecopsychologists, on recognizing the psyche’s urge for rootedness and a sense of belonging emphasize the need to bridge the worlds of nature and culture. According to them, when man links himself with nature he gains a sense of confidence and pleasure which in turn may result in a healthy and nurtured psyche.
This view is shared by many contemporary American writers dealing with the theme of culture- nature relationship. Though Edward Abbey perceives nature as a refuge from the urban- industrial culture, his awareness about the significance of rootedness is quite evident in works like *Desert Solitaire*. Bill McKibben attributes the ecocidal activities of modern man to his deracinated state. Wendell Berry and Garry Snyder are the chief supporters of bioregionalism which offers a panacea for the deracinated state of modern man. According to them, man who is a product of culture is nurtured by a sense of place and community to become a complete individual. Groundedness is seen as the right path to self-realization. A deep knowledge of a bioregion to which one belongs creates a sense of attachment to one’s place and to the community that resides there. Only such a relationship can ensure a healthy human psyche existing in a harmonious relationship with a healthy and wholly functioning earth.

While ecopsychology attempts to foster awareness about an intimate and profound symbiotic relationship between human beings and the environment in order to promote the health of the human psyche, it implicitly emphasizes the deep emotional bond between human beings and the planet. Contemporary American literature dealing with environment too expresses a similar perception about the man-nature relationship. The sense of interconnectedness that the writers experience urges them to advocate a life of harmony with nature which may help humanity perceive itself as an inseparable unit of nature. Reflecting the views of ecopsychologists they see in the expression of human consciousness the voice of the self-regulating biosphere.
Religious aspects have played a major role in moulding the perceptions of most of these writers. The knowledge about Buddhist principles and the spirituality and cosmology of pre-Colombian Native American tribes have enabled Gary Snyder to understand the interdependence of the human and the non-human and the intrinsic worth of everything that exists in the universe. Wendell Berry greatly influenced by the Christian ethics of ‘stewardship’ views the bountiful earth as a special gift of God to mankind and exhorts his fellow human beings to lead a responsible and sustainable way of life. Annie Dillard, in a manner that reminds one of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Henry David Thoreau, experiences the presence of divinity in nature, which inspires her to remind human beings to live in the ‘present’, enjoying the intricacy and mystery of Creation with gratitude.

As Indian readers of American literature, we find interesting parallels and correspondences in contemporary American nature writing. The perceptions of these contemporary American writers and the basic assumptions of ecopsychology about the man-nature relationship bear a close similarity to the religious and philosophic beliefs of India. The ancient culture of India has its foundation on a symbiotic relationship between the human and the non-human world. It teaches human beings to approach nature with humility and respect. The sacred groves of India, for instance, have strong religious connotations and have been protected by the community that resides in that particular bioregion. The religious belief that each sacred grove has a presiding deity helps in inculcating a sense of respect in human minds. This ensures the protection of the natural habitat in that forested area even in the absence of any legislation. No destruction or hunting is allowed in the
sacred groves. Yet they are used as sources for honey and firewood. The ‘Devarakadu’ of Karnataka and the ‘Sarpa Kavu’ of Kerala are examples of sacred groves. In old days most of the houses in Kerala maintained a small pond for rainwater harvesting and a sacred grove where a family deity or the Snake God was worshipped. Apart from the religious connotations of these practices what is significant is the principle of a sustainable way of life and the care for nature that they had promoted.

The present plight of the planet demands a re-examination of the human attitude towards nature. Whether it is by recalling the old beliefs and practices of ancient cultures like that of Native Americans or Indians or by accepting the perceptions of the new approaches like that of ecopsychology, humanity has to make certain affirmative moves to heal modern man’s alienation from nature. As Wendell Berry aptly points out in his article “Faustian Economics: Hell hath no limits” published in ‘Harper’s Magazine’ (2008),

“To recover from our disease of limitlessness, we will have to give up the idea that we have a right to be godlike animals; that we are potentially omniscient and omnipotent, ready to discover “the secret of the universe”. We will have to start over, with a different and much older premise: the naturalness and, for creatures of limited intelligence, the necessity of limits. We must learn again to ask how we can make the most of what we are, what we have, what we have been given.”

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It is quite evident that humanity has to modify its existing approach to being in the world. When modern man realizes that caring for the planet is the only true way to care for himself he will try to know his real position in the universe. Literature of the kind that this study has concerned itself with highlights humanity’s intimate emotional bond with the rest of the universe; it serves both as a warning bell and as a beacon of hope, not just in the American context but for all of humanity in this highly threatened planetary home of ours.

END NOTE