

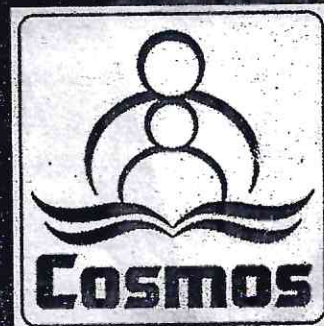
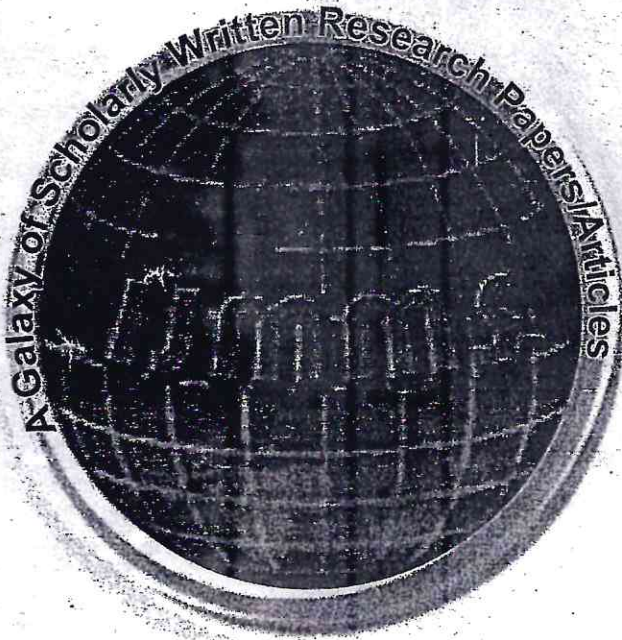
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## Cultural-anthropological Dimension of Ecocriticism and African-American Poetry

Prof. Vaibhav Aidale

### Abstract:

The term 'Ecocriticism', first used by William Rueckert in 1978, is the study of the relationship between environment and literature. There are various dimensions of ecocritical study. They are Socio-political, Cultural-anthropological, Ethical, Epistemological and Aesthetic-imaginative. However, this article is concerned only with Cultural-anthropological dimension of Ecocriticism and its application in African- American poetry. This article also exemplifies some British poems to expound the theory more explicitly. Cultural-anthropological dimension focuses on the cultural changes in the human history and their reflections in the literature. Another synonymous term for this dimension is 'Cultural Ecology', coined by anthropologist Julian Steward to imply that the humans' adaptation with nature (Environment) can lead to change in culture.

Afro-American poetry reflects perspicuously the pictures of the anthropology and the culture of the Blacks in reaction to their oppression, exploitation, and subjugation by the White Americans. The poetry perceives the nature in terms of their culture and their experiences in the society. At the same time, it reflects their connection with nature. This article is an attempt to focus on how nature's depiction can reflect culture. Nature like race, class, gender is the category of textual and cultural study that can be applied to texts from different periods and cultures.

**Key words:** Ecocriticism, culture, cultural ecology, Afro-American poetry

**Introduction:** When we think about cultural studies, our attention hovers over the categories of race, class, gender but we think little about the category of nature. However, nature can reflect the culture lucidly. Ecocriticism should take the helm for cultural studies since its transdisciplinary and transnational spectrum has made it ubiquitous in literary, social, cultural, economic, political, philosophical, educational and psychological fields. The interconnection between nature and culture has given rise to the concept of 'Cultural Ecology', a term coined by anthropologist Julian Steward in his 'Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution' (1955). Steward says that cultural change takes place when humans start adaptation with the change in environment. Nature- culture interrelatedness can be seen in myths, rituals, oral stories, legends, fairy tales, pastoral literature and nature poetry. The cultural ecology studies how physical and biological environmental forces with its flora, fauna and climate can influence humans and how humans with their culturally built psyche can affect the biosphere. Even the structures of houses are determined by the prevalent environmental conditions. For instance, Central Americans prefer ranch homes. Weather conditions also decide our clothing style.

**Human sensibilities and change in culture:** Gilbert White, author of a book 'The Natural History of Selbourne' (1789), says that in 1756, the vicar of Selborne planted four lime trees so as to hide the sight blood and filth in butcher's yard opposite to his house. According to Keith Thomas, this act changed the environmental sensibilities of the majority of people including P.B. Shelley who gave up the consumption of meat. Henceforth the meat was sold without face of the animal.

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, men have realized the impending danger of the productions and consumptions. They realized that owing to our nonchalant and reckless attitudes to ecosystem, we are going to face irrevocable and inevitable ecological crisis. Slovak Zizek, a philosopher, connects the ecological crisis with Lacan's concept of the 'Real' which is irreducible to symbolic representation as it is unmimetic. Therefore, much of the literary works of the 18th century focus on the idealized, tamed, and beautiful nature instead of its dark side.



**Cultural Advancement and Exploitation of Nature:** Another connection between Culture and Nature is seen in cultural advancement leading to nature's consumptions. This is reflected in Michelle Boisseau's poem 'Parchment' that imparts that the cultural advancement and progress is always at the cost of nature's consumption. The culture (*techne*) builds its so-called beautiful artifact at the cost of the loss of nature (*physis*). She directs our attention to materialistic development, which is at the cost of natural world. The parchment is made up of the skin of a slaughtered calf; the ink is made from oak trees and insect-engendered galls. Thus, the price of product is borne by the non-human others. Such book of parchment is produced for the king. This implies humans' exploitation of nature.

Walter Benjamin in his book, 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History' observes that there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'. Ecocritics think that 'there is no work of culture which is not simultaneously exploitative of nature'

**Nature's role in shaping culture:** White and subsequent Ecocritics think that natural world is not a passive recipient of human interventions, but it is an active participant in the formation and transformation of human culture and society.

Aldo Leopold in 1949 thinks that many historical events, we explain only in terms of humans' enterprise but in fact, these events are biotic interactions between people and land. E.g. wooden plough was being used in Mediterranean region because of the soft soil, but in the northern Europe since the soil was sturdy and hard, men had to invent iron plough.

Jonathan Bate says that 'human culture functions through links and reciprocal relations with nature'. He gives example of Byron's apocalyptic poem 'Darkness' (1816) and Keats's idyllic ode 'To Autumn'. In 1815, an eruption of Tambora Volcano in Indonesia created a link with Byron's 'Darkness' and a clear, warm, first good summer since 1815 made Keats to write 'To Autumn'. Most of the earlier writing described man's dominion over nature. However, since the **Global Warming Criticism** and **Chaos Theory** it is noticed that nature decides the course of culture. Global warming criticism takes nature 'not as passive, orderly, and compliant' but it takes it as actively at times fiercely responsive to our interventions.

In terms of Gayatri Spivok's view of the subaltern, 'that human subaltern cannot be heard without the mediation of more privileged supporters in the same way some bio-regions are not silent'. Nature mediates through volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, deluges, global warming, etc.

**Cultural-anthropological dimension:** Cultural-anthropological reflection is one of the dimensions of ecocritical study. It reflects that culture and nature are two sides of a coin. The health and beauty of the former is inseparable from those of the latter. It explores the theme of alienation of human beings from natural and social life. Romantic period was the turning point in the long western tradition of human domination over nature. Romantic culture views that 'the root of the modern human malaise is its separation from its original unity with nature and the cure for the disease lies in the reunion between humanity and nature'. Lynn White Jr., a historian blames the Christian culture for promoting 'anthropocentric arrogance in man and the resultant exploitation of nature'.

Western religions and philosophy are deeply anthropocentric since in it, human beings are considered superior to nature and they are free to exploit natural resources and animal species for their own purposes. Genesis I says god gave man 'dominion over the fish of the sea, birds of the air, cattle and all over the earth'. Some environmental critics maintain the view that the ecological crisis can be stemmed by repudiating Judeo-Christian views that only human beings have souls therefore; they are the masters of the world. When we think about Romantic Poetry, it



reflects romantic culture of the time; the influences of French revolutions and the industrial revolution. Romantic poetry is a reaction to the materialistic attitude of the people. Romantic tradition (1798-1832) seems to be a change in the neo-classical culture (1660-1798). This change can be seen in the naturalization of the mind of the poets and their deep ecological beliefs showing their interests and love for the flora and fauna. This change can be seen when S.T. Coleridge and John Keats idolize 'The Nightingale' P.B. Shelley 'to Skylark' Wordsworth to 'Cuckoo' and John Clare to 'Yellowhammer' and so on.

Wordsworth's Sonnet 'The World is Too Much With Us' speaks about the culture of the time. He vehemently asserts that the world is too much with us. Here the word 'world' implies not the natural world but the materialistic world of finance and factories polluting the nature as well as the minds of the people. Wordsworth is against the industrial revolution of the time. When the majority of the people are engrossed in earning and spending, he desires to be a Pagan. He exhorts the people to green their eyes and their minds by living in company of nature.

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,*

*Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—*

*Little we see in Nature that is ours;*

*We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

*This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;*

*The winds that will be howling at all hours,*

*And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;*

*For this, for everything, we are out of tune;*

*It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be*

*A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;*

*So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,*

*Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;*

*Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;*

*Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.*

**Cultural-anthropological study of African-American Poetry:** Afro-American is an oppressed community in terms of their class and race. Their oppression, servitude, plight make them find solace and consolation in nature. Therefore, the nature in their poetry vents their culture, their beliefs, their self, their community and their nation. In the poetry of African-American poets like **Phillis Wheatley** and **George McClellan** nature is considered as deity since in their culture, forests were used for religious services. Their attachment, preoccupation and proclivity towards nature differentiate them from their oppressor, the Whites, who dominated and exploited nature for their profit. Here, nature is symbolized as the subjugated and oppressed Afro-Americans. The association between nature and Africans can build a term 'Ecoafricanism' like 'Ecofeminism.' When we study Afro-American poetry from a cultural-anthropological dimension, we come across the sense of **hostility and alienation** in relation with nature. Nature seems to be hostile for these poets as they were coercively brought to new world as slaves and they were forcibly harnessed to



work in an uncongenial weather conditions. The feeling hostility reverberates in the poem 'Children of the Mississippi' by Sterling Brown.

*These know fear; for all their singing...*

*These folk knew even then the hints of fear...*

*These folk know grief.*

*They have seen*

*Black water gurgling, lapping, roaring,*

*Take their lives' earnings, roll off their paltry...*

*These have known death*

*Surprising, rapacious of cattle, of children,*

*Creeping with the black water...*

*No buoyant hoping now, only dank memories*

*Bitter as the waters, bracken as the waters,*

*Black and unceasing as hostile waters.*

The Afro-Americans were given a task of cleaning the Mississippi Delta in order to convert it into arable agricultural territory. The task was so filthy and cumbersome that produced the feelings of hostility with nature. The phrases like 'black water', 'dank memories' make us realize their vexation and misery. The Africans felt alienated, as they had to abandon their indigenous places in the company of congenial nature. The following poem 'Wood and Rain' by Melvin Dixon speaks about these people's strong relation with nature when they were alive and even at the time of their deaths by lynching.

*I am black man of woods*

*weeping*

*where old trees root*

*like men*

*hollering*

*in the wind*

*for lost children...*

*there is no hiding, there is no home*

*in wet woods or this soil ...*

the expressions like 'hollering..... for lost children' refers to the deaths of children by hanging on the charge of extralegal actions. Between 1882 to 1968 approximately 4,742 black people were lynched illegally and the same number of people were legally lynched. Thus, tree became a symbol of servile oppression for the early Afro-American Poets.

The enslaved Blacks were made to live in the company of nature along with other beasts and birds. This thing augmented their relationship with nature. They became more knowledgeable about farming and medicinal herbs than the Whites.



'Rape of Florida' by Albery Whitman shows the Afro-Americans love for the wilderness as a pristine nature free from the company of the Whites. This wilderness has become a symbol for their inherent desire to dwell freely. They wanted to dwell in such land which is not accessible for their oppressors.

The poem 'Lament for Dark People' by Langston Hughes shows the tight bond between Africans and wild nature. They express a feeling of hatred for the civilized world as for them civilized world is like a cage.

*hey drove me out of the forest.*

*They took me away from the jungles.*

*I lost my trees.*

*I lost my silver moons.*

*Now they've caged me*

*In the circus of civilization.*

*Now I herd with the many –*

*Caged in the circus of civilization.*

When we think about modern Afro-American poetry, we notice that these poets assumes nature as a paradise and this paradise, being vulnerable, is getting destroyed, profaned and exploited at the hands of the Whites. The Blacks wanted to keep the greenness of the nature but the green is getting blackened at the white hands. The Black considers that nature gives them solace, protection, sympathy so they feel sad to notice its destructions.

The poem 'Look at the Blackbird Fall' by June Jordan illustrates the technological advancement of the civilization at the cost of the despoliation of nature. The white brain is scrubbing out the green of the earth and tarnishing the blue of the sky with smokes.

*look at the blackbird fall*

*down*

*into the lake*

*split white speedboats full of white people*

*loading the atmosphere with gasoline*

*and noise*

*now*

*you can't drink the water*

*of the lake ...*

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