



Indiscernible elements of Ecocriticism in Robert Frost Poetry

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and physical environment. In this context this paper deals with various elements of ecocriticism in the poetry of Robert Frost which are either ignored or not considered worthy to be seen from the prism of ecocriticism. Paper extracts out all those elements from his collections of poems such as 'A Boy's will', 'New Hampshire', 'Mountain Interval' and 'North of Boston'. The distinctiveness in Robert Frost's poetry was treating nature as separate entity at one hand and took it as metaphorical representation of human nature and world on the other. Paper puts light on antagonist and protagonist elements of nature along with it also gave special emphasis on exploitation of nature by human and convey message for the world to have a look on their irrational activities.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Romantic period, Pastoral, Metaphorical, Protagonist, Antagonist, Exploitation, Agro-forestry.*

What is Ecocriticism?

When debate on ecocriticism started in late 1980s and early 90s, it was understood that environment is quintessential for human existence and its degradation in various ways is threatening the existence of human race. There is no unanimity in describing ecocriticism, but the most well known definition is of Cheryll Glotfelty which she proposed in *The Ecocriticism Reader*: 'the study of the relation between literature and the physical environment' (Glotfelty, 1996) (Rangarajan, 2019).

Ecocriticism has been derived from Greek words *oikos* (meaning 'household') and *kritis* (meaning 'judge') 'the arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order' (Howarth, 2000, p. 163). Ursula Heise writes Ecocritics practise a triple allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations and the political struggle for inhabiting an environmentally sustainable world. (Heise, 2006, p. 503)

In this manner Ecocriticism tries to recognize roots of relationship between human and nature. It also focuses on repercussions in the form environmental loss which will ultimately affect future generations, that's why sustainable development has become a global motto nowadays. To save natural resources whether they are forest,

wildlife, soil, water, air or mineral resources is prime necessity of 21st century. The standard of human life very much depends on the quality of environment. Even the survival of culture is determined by a well integrated and safe environment e.g. Naturalistic Polytheism of ancient Hinduism. Hence it has become quintessential for all nations that they try to save environment. In this context a literary piece should deal with rising environmental issues and try to understand the relationship between human activities and its implications on nature.

Romantic writers are considered as precursor of Ecocriticism among them William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelly, John Keats, William Blake were leading poets. But Robert Frost in early 20th century presented nature in a new manner in his poems which were considered as not based on nature according to the contemporaries. This debate was considered settled when Robert Frost himself accepted that he hardly wrote 4-5 poems purely on nature. His poems on close examination are found to represent a significant aspect of relationship between nature and human. It is the attitude of human towards nature, meaninglessness of human in absence of nature, courtesy to the ever existing relationship between both and presence of nature in both protagonist and antagonist roles in lives of human being which are significant attributes of ecocriticism in Robert Frost poetry. From the perspective of an ecocritic it is important to have insight into such work which shows nature and human in a relationship.

Description of Nature

Robert Frost delineated beauties of November by showing it's desolateness in the poem 'My November Guest' from the collection 'A Boys Will'. Similar description is found in the poem 'To the thawing Wind' in which 'southwester' and its effect on nature and humans is beautifully described. He wrote-

*Come with rain, O loud Southwester!
Bring the singer, bring the nester;
Give the buried flower a dream;
Make the settled snowbank steam;
Find the brown beneath the white;*

The urgings of the poet to the southwester—which is a warm wind—is to give life to the frozen earth and human beings from the winters. The diversity in phenomenon of nature—where contrasting elements of nature are working simultaneously—is easily noticeable. The presentation of southwester is none less than a poet of romantic period. These lines bring the effect of 'Ode to the west wind' by P.B. Shelly where the effect of west wind bring back seeds into life which were buried under cold-

"The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,

*Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow*

*“Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill.”(Shelley)*

Autumn has always provided productive weather to write poetry to a whole bunch of writers including famous ones like ‘Ode to autumn’ by Keats. Frost has also depicted autumn dextrously in ‘My November Guest’, ‘Going for Water’, and ‘The Census taker’. In The census taker frost writes-

*“The time was autumn, but how anyone
Could tell the time of year when every tree
That could have dropped a leaf was down itself
And nothing but the stump of it was left
Now bringing out its rings in sugar of pitch;
And every tree up stood a rottings trunk”*

Trees are turned into a robbed person during autumn and Frost portrayed the season with blunt truth without any embellishment. His description of autumn also shows beauty of nature in such season when trees are devoid of their embellishment i.e. greenery and what is visible is just brown stumps and branches of trees. At the other hand Poem ‘October’ sets background for autumn as it is pre autumn times. Trees have got their leaves turned pale and they are ready for fall anytime. Poet requests mild morning to not bereave trees of all of their leaves at once with wind but to let them fall one by one from here and there. He writes-

*O hushed October morning mild,
Begin the hours of this day slow,*

*Release one leaf at break of day;
At noon release another leaf;
One from our trees, one far away;*

Along with these poems having direct description of the nature, we witness Frost's poems have copious references of nature or natural surroundings in human world. It is so because Frost wrote on pastoral life which has active play of nature in daily happenings along with many references of harvest in his poems. It is also because he has used metaphors of nature to describe human world and their problems. In a poem titled as 'A Boundless moment' frost symbolise a frozen tree of winter and its dried out leaves with old and unfulfilled human desires, moments to which human keep on clinging. He then dreams of March and May during which flowers bloom and nature renews itself. He says-

*"Oh, that's the Paradise-in-bloom," I said;
And truly it was fair enough for flowers
Had we but in us to assume in March
Such white luxuriance of May for ours.*

These images of nature may be metaphorical but presence of them in the poem provides it a natural touch. Such natural touch can only be given by a poet who has observed the nature very closely. Who understands how nature's schemes of things and human's character and traits works. Such imagery belongs to that person who has eyes and interest for activities of nature and its beauties.

Nature is both antagonist and protagonist

Frost has basically exposed human conflicts and predicaments through nature. His usage of nature at most occasions is a symbol for either human strength or weakness. He has tried to include nature in his almost every poem. For instance in 'After Apple picking' Nature as a philanthropist gave harvest of apples in abundance. But the author took it as a burden of worldly life. For him abundance of crop and increased work load due to this abundance has featured nature as both protagonist and antagonist simultaneously. He said '*I am overtired/Of the great harvest I myself desired*'.

Nature for Frost was constant companion of man in part and parcel of life. Man at the one hand sees a well wisher in form of nature which provides requisite resources but at the other side 'snow', 'rain' and 'winter' are considered as acts of nature against man. In 'New Hampshire' Frost writes a man went to forest with a double axe and run away from nature then Frost quote Mathew Arnold that 'Nature is cruel, and man is sick of blood'. In the 'Wood Pile'— part of collection 'North of Boston'—poet is held by 'hard snow'. Similarly an old man is afraid of a winter night from 'roar Of trees and crack of branches, common things', in the poem 'An old man's winter night'.

In the famous poem 'Stopping by woods on Snowy Evening' the horse of the poet felt the surrounding was queer as no farmhouse was there and they were standing between woods and frozen lake and it was a dark night. In the poem 'To the thawing wind' nature buried the life under its snow. Poet aptly described such image in lines "*Give the buried flower a dream; Make the settled snowbank steam*". Then the very nature heroically emerges in form of warm wind named southwester and gave a new life to various forms of life on surface.

These various aspects of nature often make man afraid of it. Through these things Frost has shown that nature is part of man's life. It reflects characteristics of man such as his responsibilities and man's attempt to run away from these for instance in 'birches' poet on watching birches imagines about a child who is swinging the birch trees. Poet thinks for himself that- 'I'd like to get away from earth awhile' by swinging on birches. But he also accepts that he wants to return to Earth, a place where love is found.

Nature can be a good examiner which may seem to us an antagonist. It can test us by putting various natural obstacles in front of us. In the poem 'On a tree fallen across the road' a tree is found fallen across the road is giving signal that life is not easy to live and things don't go here according to expectation. In this poem nature bluntly says 'Who we think we are insisting always on our way so'. Such metaphorical representation of nature for obstacles of life is very apt. But it is true to an extent that nature has its ways to show antagonistic element towards man.

Exploitation of Nature

Indiscriminate exploitation of nature has been habit of human beings. Our greed has put human race on stake. We are eating and drinking chemicals and breathing gases. Our daily life is full of anti nature activities from cutting woods to injecting garbage in rivers. We have monopolised the earth and exploiting nature to the contentment of our heart. In one of the poems of frost titled as 'Blueberries' too much forest cutting happened and poet writes "*It must be on charcoal they fatten their fruit. I taste in them sometimes the flavour of soot*".

Environmentalists are promoting agro-forestry to fulfil wood requirement and provide a decent amount to farmers. It serves both purposes save forest and discourages deforestation. But there are many who own a large tract of land comprise a whole forest. When such forest is cut off in name of agro-forestry or personal property then nature takes the back seat. Frost has shown a deal of forest in his poem 'Christmas Trees' in collection of poems 'Mountain Interval'. Frost writes-

"A thousand trees would come to thirty dollars."

The dealer tries to get the forest of narrator in cheap price of thirty dollars. This strongly suggests the value of nature in human eyes. Human always try to materialise nature for its own benefits. This materialisation has brought world to the threshold of climate change.

A message to humanity by a true Ecocritic

Frost has represented nature directly in his poems but never let his readers felt that he is a nature poet. His portrayal of nature had been prolific yet doubtful. Critics have always debated on characteristics of his poems esp. in context of nature. But there is no doubt that Frost's poetry is heavily contingent on nature. He exposed human activities in nature and manner of dealing with nature. In his one of the famous poems named 'Blueberries' Frost by highlighting the plight of nature gave a beautiful message that-

*"It's a nice way to live, Just taking what Nature is willing to give,
Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow."*

This message is a beautiful teaching to the world striving to exploit nature day and night. We are using various types of chemicals to grow more crops. But in this pursuit we are polluting water and soil. Along with this we are trying to disrupt natural process of plantation. We should keep in mind that nature also has its limit.

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