

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND ITS IMPACT ON LIVING ORGANISMS, ECONOMY AND REFLECTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN LITERATURE: A CORRELATIVE STUDY*

BY

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Abstract

This paper attempts to correlate environmental degradation with living organisms, human life and economy and it also explores the reflection of environmental concerns in literature. Quality of environment and sustenance of human world is closely related. The genesis and evolution of life of living organism itself is from the nature. Environment and organisms have nonreciprocal and direct relationship having interdependence. Both of these factors impact and influence the quality and sustainability of each other. With better environment only the human life can become richer and happier. But unfortunately interference of human world on nature is leading to latter's degradation which reversely affects the human sustainability and survival. The past life in some centuries have accentuated the fact how man has treated and utilized environmental assets with a gluttonous greed as if human life is going to an end. The poor quality of environment affects the sustenance of human life, life of living organisms and it is largely related with the economy too. Literature being the mirror of life, reflects human thought process, actions, fantasy and reality in best possible manner. In all literatures of the world, literatures have explored, commented and brought brighter and darker side of environment and nature very poignantly and clearly. Many celebrated poets and writers across the time like William Wordsworth, Tennyson, Rousseau, Henry D. Thoreau have expressed their concern on degradation of environment in their respective works. Ecocriticism is a separate branch of learning that began in early 1990s. Ecological imbalance not only affects living organisms but it also impacts human life and economy and the environmental concerns are reflected in world literature.

Keywords: Environment, degradation, literature, green economy, ecocriticism

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Introduction

No individual organism can exist in isolation but it always survives, grows and sustains in community. The organisms always interact and get impacted by the things and conditions like water, air, soil, light, temperature, pressure and other energies present around them. At the same time, these living organisms

also, interact, influence and change the conditions present around them. These components always have specific importance on the survival, growth and development of the organisms. Any variation in the factors of these surroundings may affect each and every individual on the earth either directly or indirectly. These things and conditions which influence the organisms and similarly get influenced by the organisms is called environment. Inappropriate, careless, unsustainable and unethical use of different assets of environment like air, water, soil, forests and wild life leads to degradation of the environment. Deterioration of the environment by any means can affect the organisms at individual, community, social and global level at present and in future too. Now it is highly imperative to safeguard the environment for the better survival of all the species including human on this planet. The environmental quagmire and adoption of mitigating strategies and policies need a serious attention on global level for sustainable future life on earth.

It is beyond doubt that organism and the environment are two non separable things of the nature. They interact and influence each other either directly or indirectly and always stay in a perfect balance. We are completely dependent on the nature for everything that we need for survival. We get food from the plants, we use soil, water, minerals, and we breathe life from air. Our medicines, cosmetics and fashion also have roots in the nature. We are protected from dangerous UV rays of sun by the naturally formed ozone layer. The things what we are enjoying from the nature are precious and incalculable. Even we can't imagine how much we have to pay for oxygen we breath, water we drink, minerals we use, ozone we shelter and beauty of forests & wild life we take pleasure in. Ethically it is our responsibility to protect each and every element of the environment for better survival of us and future generations.

But due to greedy and over ambitious nature, we are employing our intellectuality to manipulate the environment as per our requirement. We are over using our natural resources, releasing harmful chemicals in to the air, soil and water, cutting the forests, exploiting other species and manufacturing non degradable compounds. We are disturbing the environment brutally without any care, consciousness and ethics. It is disturbing and degrading the environment at individual, community, society and global level. As a two way interactive system, the damaged environment will show its impact and definitely it will not be fit for our survival on this planet in the future.

Environment has no boundary and it is distributed over entire earth and hence it is universal. So, deterioration of the environment by any means can disturb the natural balance and can affect the survival, growth and development of each and every organism on the earth either directly or indirectly.

Environmental Degradation: Present Predicament

Various human activities like deforestation, urbanization, land mining, heavy industrialization, excess automobiles, use of non-biodegradable chemicals and materials, improper use of natural resources like land and water leads to degradation of the environment. Other than these, some natural activities like volcanic eruptions, forest fires, earth quacks, landslides, drought, floods and tsunamis also contribute to the environmental degradation. If any part of the environment is degraded, it will definitely show its impact on the entire living organism present in that habitat, and also affect other parts of the environment.

The air pollution in India is of serious concern in last few decades. Some of the cities of India are most polluted in terms of air quality. Different chemicals like oxides of carbon, nitrogen and sulfur, chloro-

fluoro carbons (CFC) and suspended dust particles are the main pollutants of urban environment. In some major cities, the suspended particle matter in the air is several times higher than the WHO limits. Several cities of India are experiencing severe drought. In Maharashtra state, due to extreme drought, some of the places are even not suitable for human living. Heavy money, labor and time are being spent in these areas to fulfill basic requirements for survival.

Release of untreated garbage and industrial effluents in to the streams and rivers is degrading water quality and also damaging natural aquatic biota. In long term, it may leads to loss of biodiversity and decline of food resources for birds, animals and human beings. It can also affect the ground water quality and will be responsible for several human health issues.

Plastic is considered one of the great inventions, but excessive and improper use of this product created never-ending pollution and made it as a devil of the present time. Now a day's plastic is everywhere, in forests, agricultural fields, waste land, streams, rivers, oceans, etc. it is impossible to find a place without plastic. Plastic landfills are one of the major issues of urban world. One time used polythene created artificial floods in several cities. These plastic materials are also interfering with various natural phenomenons and causing serious and life threatening problems to birds and animals. The deleterious health effects may be observed in the form of overt clinical signs and higher morbidity and mortality or as subtle or subclinical effects. Pesticide toxicity, plumbism, mercury poisoning and fluorosis are some of the commonly encountered overt toxic problems due to pollution in domestic animals (Swarup, D. & Patra, R.C. (2005).

Impact of Degradation on Living Organisms

Environmental degradation is a long time process, which happens at very less magnitude. The impact of environmental degradation can be seen with naked eye and can be analyzed with certain technological and analytical tools.

Damaged environment is not suitable for the living organisms including human beings. Pollution, global warming, acid rains, rise in the sea level and damage to ozone layer are the some long term effects on environment which indirectly impact the human life. Whereas, diseases, unpleasant odor, man-wild life conflict, loss of niche, un-availability of healthy food and pure water are the some of the consequences of environmental degradation which directly impact the human life. The air pollution coming from automobiles and industries leads to several diseases like asthma, bronchitis, skin rashes, eye problems and even cancer. In severe cases, it can affect future generations by causing gene mutations. Improper and excessive use of chemicals in agriculture leads to several digestive, neural and hormonal problems. These chemicals accumulate in living organisms and shows magnification effect which may leads to death of birds, earth worms, insects and fishes. It disturbs the food cycle and imbalance the food web which may leads to loss of biodiversity.

Un-authorized mining, deforestation, forest fragmentation and encroaching in to forest land disturbs the wild animals and causes human wildlife conflicts. It horrifies and leads to death of several wild animals and human beings.

Soil erosion and improper agricultural practices may lead to soil infertility which may cause unavailability of qualitative food and water for the animals and human beings.

Restoration of damaged environment is very necessary but it requires a lot of money, labor and time. So, it is very essential to use the natural resources in a proper and scientific way to protect the environment and to prevent the damage to the natural resources.

Environmental Degradation and Economy

Society, an abstract concept, designating a mass of people with common values or belief systems, invariably includes every citizen who is an integral and representative part of it. Quality of environment and sustainability of individual or group are closely related. The degradation of environment automatically affects individual or public health and well-being. The societal well-being and progress largely depends upon economic policies of the nation and economy is affected by the environment and use of natural resources. 'Poor environmental quality in turn affects economic growth by lowering the quality and quantity of resources or due to health impacts' (Global forum on Environment) 'Economic policies which are sound and harmoniously coexisting with environmental aspects contribute in both the economic as well as environmental welfare (Chakraborty 117). A recent study by Khan *et. al.* (2020) suggests that policymakers should consider social well-being and environmental degradation in economic activity to achieve sustainable development goals.

Hence, it is beyond doubt that economy plays a crucial role in the environmental degradation. According to Everett *et.al.* (2010) the natural environment plays an important role in supporting economic activity. It contributes

- a) directly by providing resources and raw materials such as water, timber and minerals that are required as inputs for the production of goods and services; and
- b) indirectly, through services provided by ecosystems including carbon sequestration, water purification, managing flood risks, and nutrient cycling (*Economic Growth and Environment 7*).

To alleviate the detrimental effects of economic policies on environment, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) proposed a program known as 'Global Green New Deal' to revive the global economy and boost employment and simultaneously accelerating the cause to fight against climate change, environmental degradation and poverty (Bhat 111).

Considering the role of economy in mitigation of environmental quagmire, a concept of Green Economy gained momentum throughout the world. For fulfilling the objectives of green economy, a collaborative action, inclusion and participation of various sectors like civil society, different levels of government, agencies, business community is required. 'The concept of green economy resonates to issues pertaining to global, social, and financial capital for social equity, economic advancement and environmental sustainability' (Bhat 116).

Reflection of Environmental Concerns in Literature

Literature is the mirror of life. Whatever happens in life must be necessarily reflected in literature. Since environment is an integral part of human life, it must be presented in literature with its brighter as well as darker aspects. "As literature engages with life and everything in the world, it must engage with environment" says Murali Shivram Krishnan (qtd. in Garcha 126).

Nature has always been a prime focus in the literatures of the world. In the past few decades, literature across the world has developed a distinct body of writings named ‘ecocriticism’ with environmental concerns as its focal point. Ecocriticism is a broad term which involves the environment oriented literature, art and theories.

It investigates environmental dimensions of literature. Ecocriticism started with love for nature and gradually with change in the environment this affection turned into concern. This is what Lawrence Buell discusses in his book, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*; where he talks about the former as the first wave and the latter as the second wave of ecocriticism (www.kenhiltner.com). Ecocriticism explores and investigates the global issues such as deforestation, climate change, pollution, global warming and other health hazards caused due to unethical ecological practices by human beings. ‘Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof—by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern—can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems; the multiple forms of ecodegradation that afflict planet Earth today (Buell et.al, 418). In the early 1990s when ecocriticism evolved as a branch of learning, nature was presented and equated as environment,. The study mainly focused on depiction of nature and natural world in various genres of literary like poetry, fiction and nonfiction. The study meant to promote human contact with nature and preservation of nature.

In the beginning literature, nature was presented as beautiful and strong and powerful force and inspiration of human life. This tradition continued up to romantic age in 18th and 19th centuries.. The romantic poets like William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, William Blake, John Keats, P. B. Shelley have written about lyrical description of nature in their poetry. With the advent of industrial revolution, the beauty in the natural environment degraded and the poets started writing about its degradation and emphasized on excessive human interference in the world of environment. Though literature produced after industrial revolution did not portray the problems and issues caused by industrial growth and revolution, it narrated the pathetic state of environment caused due to industrial waste and concretization of natural setting. But the further period witnessed rapid deterioration in the second half of 20th century in the east as well as in the west in the late 20th century. In 1978, Rupert brought each voice raised for nature’s concern under the term of Ecocriticism which he used in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*.

The poet Sir John Betjeman in his poem *Inexpensive Progress* from his anthology *High and Low* (1966) expresses deep concern on the issue of environmental degradation caused by material progress, industrialization and greedy nature of modern man. He writes

And if there is some scenery

Some unpretentious greenery

Surviving anywhere

It does not need protecting

For soon we'll be erecting

A Power Station there. (Betjeman qtd. in Gardner 175)

The poem is a satire on human behavior in modern times. In modern times the man is so running after the material progress that if there is any greenery, it won't need any protection because very soon it converts into a power station.

Many writers and poets like William Wordsworth, Tina Morris, Alice Walker, Walt Whitman, Charles Dickens, Francis Bacon, Mahatma Gandhi, Arundhati Roy, H. D. Thoreau have expressed environmental concerns through their writings. Tina Morris in her poem *Tree* expresses her concern for aftermath of deforestation due to cutting of trees. She writes

They did not tell us
What is would be like
Without trees

She complains that people have not taught next generations how difficult the life would be without greenery and hence she wants to bring people's attention towards this issue.

Charles Dickens the famous British novelist depicts the environmental degradation and environmental pollution caused by industrial growth.

The uncontrollable and hopeless mass of decomposition so engendered, would have polluted the air, even if poverty and deprivation had not loaded it with their intangible impurities; the two bad sources combined made it almost insupportable. Through such an atmosphere, by a steep dark shaft of dirt and poison, the way lay. Yielding to his own disturbance of mind, and to his young companion's agitation, which became greater every instant, Mr. Jarvis Lorry twice stopped to rest (*The Tale of Two Cities*, 36).

In Indian English fiction, Arundhati Roy, Arvind Adiga and Kiran Desai have written novels that exhibit their ecological concerns. *The God of Small Things* by Roy, *White Tiger* by Adiga and *Inheritance of Loss* by Desai highlight environmental issues. Many researchers and critic question whether such literary texts can bring any positive change in alleviating or solving the ecological issues. Though the literary texts like novels, poems, dramas do not offer any ready-made solutions to such problems, they create awareness and shape our vision and perspectives of looking towards the environment. 'Popular narratives constitute powerful tools that shape the socio-cultural context of environmental change, influence policymaking and inform public understanding to considerable degrees. Narratives portraying future scenarios and environmental transformations are used and remediated through a multitude of popular communication venues' (Christensen et.al). This awareness through literature has evolved separate body of literature also. 'In recent decades, environmental risk in its associations with climate change has grown into an increasingly prominent theme in environmental literature, resulting in a specific literary genre – so-called climate change fiction, or cli-fi for short (Christensen et.al.)'. Such specialized works shows and proves that how poets and writers are concerned for environment and they wish to bring desirable changes so that human life can become long lasting, easy and environment friendly. 'Many climate change novels are set far in the future, in

a dystopian or post-apocalyptic setting, reflecting the prevalence of apocalypse as a major theme in environmental literature' (Johns-Putra, 2016; Garrard, 2001).

Conclusion

The sustainability of human life on this planet depends upon the quality of environment and the way we treat other living animals, flora and fauna. The environmental degradation being a global phenomenon, a comprehensive policy is imperative where ecological, social, political visions across the world are fused and integrated for betterment of life process on earth. The efforts are to be made by all stakeholders of life. Our visions and perspectives for better environment need to be translated into action with greater force and will power. Then only we can save our environment and transfer the legacy to next generations with adequate resources. Environmental issues have been reflected in the world literature but it limits to public sensitization and awareness only and it does not endorse any mitigation measures. The enforcement of policies of green economy and environmentally responsible behavior (ERB) which is gaining momentum across the globe is also seen as the coping strategy to alleviate the detrimental effects of the degradation on human life. Human habit of exploiting nature and environment needs immediate attention and redressal action in due time. The uncensored human efforts for damaging the environment may lead to irreparable loss resulting into extinction of many species along with human beings.

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