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Earth, Self and the Universe: An Ecocritical Exploration of Whitman and Nazrul's Poetry

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Abstract

The study of representations of the natural environment in a literary text is commonly termed as eco criticism. It emerged as a critical and cultural approach to literary analysis while the voice rose against the crucial environmental crisis over the world in the later 1980s. Since the onset of industrialization and the rise of the capital economy, the rift between humans and the natural environment has grown steadily. Throughout the ages, poets and authors have stressed the importance of a harmonious relationship between man and the natural world to ensure a balanced and peaceful coexistence. To the utter misery, humans have shown a profound lack of concern inviting impending dangers for upcoming generations. Nowadays, numerous literary works are being analyzed through an ecocritical point of view to warn people of its dire consequences. This paper has been planned keeping this concern in mind. Here the major poems of the leading American poet Walt Whitman and Bengali National poet Kazi Nazrul Islam have been studied from an ecocritical point of view. Nature has always been the core point of interest in their literary works, which they respectively blend with their contextual observations with artistic presentations. Whitman invokes expansive verses and free verse forms suiting the best to convey the vibrancy of landscapes, affirming a harmonious relationship between humankind and the natural environment. In contrast, Kazi Nazrul Islam, the revolutionary poet of Bengal, exclusively infuses his works with intense passion and a spirit of rebellion reflecting the turbulent socio-political backdrop of early 20th-century India. By juxtaposing the ecocritical perspectives of Nazrul and Whitman, this study attempts to depict how these poets versify their ecological consciousness and retain a deeper appreciation for the natural world through their poetic creations.

Keywords: Ecology, degradation, humanity, environment, coexistence

The term 'Eco' signifies our connection to the natural environment in which we reside. Ecocriticism involves analyzing literary texts to uncover their depictions of the natural world and the interactions between humans and non-human entities. Against the backdrop of a severe environmental crisis and the exploitation of the Earth, ecocriticism emerged as a cultural and critical approach to literary analysis in the late 1980s. As climate change, resulting from environmental pollution, became the most significant threat to life

on Earth, scholars in the humanities found it imperative to act. It was deemed that the portrayal of nature or the natural environment, which is a crucial element in most literary works, had not received adequate attention in the past. The concept of ecocriticism originated as the examination of the connection between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty 1996). Throughout the last three to four decades, theoretical ideas related to ecocriticism have expanded to include concepts like ecofeminism, deep ecology, and environmental justice, addressing various issues such as the impact of environmental pollution and land exploitation on the less privileged. Clearly, when applying an ecocritical approach to a literary work, the emphasis is placed on how the natural world is depicted, how the flora and fauna of the environment sustain an ecosystem and affect human life, how nature is depicted in power dynamics, and what attitude toward nature is conveyed in the literary text. The chosen writers come from different languages and cultures. Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is a renowned American poet, essayist, and journalist, while Kazi Nazrul Islam is a Bangladeshi poet, novelist, playwright, and journalist. However, both writers are primarily known for their poetry. They have both celebrated nature and depicted the natural world in various ways in their poetry. Their works can be analyzed through an ecocritical perspective, and this research aims to thoroughly examine the portrayal of nature in their works. The goal is to construct arguments from an ecocritical viewpoint to raise awareness about the impending peril facing nature and the natural world. Additionally, the study aims to compare the two writers within the context of time and space.

Discussion and theoretical perspectives:

The influential US eco-critic Karl Kroeber was the first to coin the term "ecological criticism" in the journal PMLA. Previously, it had been widely used as "the study of nature writing" (Murphy). Cheryll Glotfelty, a pioneering literary critic in integrating literature and the environment into academic study, termed eco-criticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (415). In the UK, green studies, also known as eco-criticism, focus on promoting the British Romantics of the 1790s instead of the American transcendentalists of the 1840s. According to eco-critics, nature is a tangible reality that has a significant connection to culture. They are of the view that everything is constructed through social and linguistic means. Eco-critics emphasize that nature "really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept, but present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it" (Barry, 243). The direct result of our harmful actions towards the natural environment causes global warming, toxic waste, and nuclear fallout, all of which are anthropocentric problems. It is commendable for critics and theorists to raise awareness about this critical fact to help prevent the environment from impending natural disasters. Otherwise, it would be as striving to improve working conditions for the crew as the 'Titanic' moves swiftly towards the iceberg. John Ruskin, the renowned art critic from the Victorian era, had a strong environmental consciousness and was perhaps the first prominent British author to observe that nature's ability to recover may not be unlimited. Ruskin expressed his deep concern that industrial pollution was likely causing permanent damage to the atmosphere, a consequence of the belief that human dominion over nature has no boundaries. It is noteworthy that Emerson was not concerned about Ruskin's 'pathetic fallacy.' Instead, he believed that 'Nature always wears the color of the spirit'

(Emerson). According to Waldron and Friedman, "the goal of ecological science is consonant with ecocriticism: both seek to understand biotic relationships" (207). Before the strong influence of transnationalism, ecocriticism, and environmental literary works started to gain recognition. This new field experienced significant growth in American and British literary studies after the publication of key works such as Jonathon Bate's 'Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition' in 1991, Karl Kroeber's 'Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind' in 1994, Lawrence Buell's 'The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture' in 1995, and Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's 'Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology' in 1996. These publications were the basics of the instruments for establishing the field of Ecocritical literary study. The establishment of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) and its journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) in 1993, significantly expanded the field of Ecocritical research. The release of Greg Garrard's 'Ecocriticism' in 2004 and Lawrence Buell's 'The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination' in 2005 further solidified the ground of Ecocritical studies. In this way, the rise of ecocriticism has diminished interest in transnationalism and post-structuralism, as ecological studies have flourished in their sub-branches such as 'ecofeminism' and 'environmental justice'. Furthermore, environmental justice has turned into a significant social movement, with its advocacy expressing significant concerns about ecological threats exacerbated by inequality, particularly affecting the health of women and minority communities, the root of ecofeminism.

Review of Literature:

There are some critical writings on Nature in Whitman's poetry though critical writings on Nature in Nazrul's poems are very scarce. In his article "Whitman as a Poet of Nature" Foerester (1916) has discussed how Whitman as a mystic and naturalist could hear the voices of nature and how he loved nature and natural surroundings as sources of knowledge. Patel (2016) has made a study on Whitman's two poems "Song of Myself" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and demonstrates how natural elements represent the cycle of life and death in these two poems. In his ecocritical study of Whiteman's "Leaves of Grass" Zhang (2014) has used related ecocritical theories to explore the ideas of relationship between man and nature. Killingsworth (2010) has discussed Whiteman's ideas of earth and life with an eco-poetical perspective. As far as Nazrul's poems on nature are concerned Islam (2016) in his newspaper article "Rabindranath and Nazrul" has discussed how nature becomes an inseparable part in Nazrul's poems and songs. There are some other articles, essays, reviews etc related to nature in the poetry of Whitman and Nazrul but none of these satisfies the needs that the present research intends to achieve.

Objectives of the study:

The general objective of the research is to study or dig out the ecological ideas embedded in the poetry of Whitman and Nazrul so as to shed light on the alleviation of modern ecological crisis. The specific objectives are to find/explore:

- i) how nature is represented in the poems of Whitman and Nazrul
- ii) how the settings of the poems are related to environment

- iii) how the flora and fauna are reflected in the poems and how they influence humans
- iv) what attitude about nature has been reflected in a particular poem/text
- v) how is nature empowered or oppressed
- vi) how exploitations and deprivation occur due to environmental hazards
- vii) what relationship exists between humans and nonhuman world in the poems
- viii) what can be dug up from the poems in relation with nature, environmental injustice, land issues and others issues
- ix) other ecological ideas embedded in the poems

Justification of the research:

Human beings are increasingly polluting the natural environment; climate of the world is being changed and a catastrophe is awaiting to happen unless serious measures are taken by the human beings on earth. Therefore, reducing environmental hazards and preservation of natural environment is a pressing demand today for the existence of human life on earth. Ecocritical study of the poetry of Whitman and Nazrul can be very time- befitting and significant to develop critical insight and knowledge about our natural environment. By using the critical perspective of ecocriticism, the research is expected to explore the hitherto little explored issue of nature from the verses of Whitman and Nazrul and therefore the research will contribute as a work of scholarship in areas of ecocritical study of Nazrul and Whitman.

Scope and limitations of the research:

Due to time and other constraints, the study will not be able to discuss each and every poem of the poets as because both the poets have written a considerable number of poems. However, the verses reflecting more elements of nature will be more considered than the others.

Methodology of Research:

This study is critical in nature. Therefore, textual analysis, interpretation and developing arguments will be the main approach. While analyzing or interpreting a text, ecocritical lens or perspective will be used. The original texts or poems of the two poets will be considered primary sources of information while critical papers, reviews, essays etc on their poetry will be considered secondary sources of information. Other types of writings of the two selected poets such as essays, fiction etc will also be considered as secondary sources. In the case of Nazrul available English translations will be used for discussion/analysis. Researcher's own English translations will also be used when necessary. As far as Nazrul's poetry is concerned, songs will also be considered poems because in his case poems and songs have become almost synonymous. The study will depend on libraries, internet searches, searches of book shops, personal queries etc. for material collection.

Ecocritical Study of Walt Whitman's Poetry:

Walt Whitman, hailed as the "Bard of Democracy" is closely identical in his deep involvement with nature and its complex connection with humanity significantly tracing his ecocritical realm. Throughout his poetic works, Whitman delves deep into the themes of interconnectedness with nature, the spiritual importance of the ecological world, and the changing American landscape during his time. This study focuses on exploring the way

how Whitman's work reflects and contributes to his concern for nature and thought from an ecocritical perspective.

The transcendentalist admiration for nature is mostly evident in Whitman's poetic approach as of his contemporaries Emerson and Thoreau. Whitman's poetry frequently evaluates the splendor and liveliness of the natural world, reflecting it as both a wellspring of creativity as well as human existence. In the poem "Song of Myself," Whitman mingles his sense of self with the natural surroundings, tuning

"I represent the poet of the Body and I represent the poet of the Soul,
The joys of heaven are within me and the sorrows of hell are within me,
I nurture and magnify the former within myself, and I transform the latter
into a new language" (Whitman, "Song of Myself").

Whitman envisions a deep bond between the human soul and the environment, upholding a comprehensive perspective that unifies the physical and metaphysical aspects together.

"Whitman, thus, treats nature as his fellow beings and desires to lead his life along with her. It is almost impossible for him to be detached from nature. He takes nature as a permanent source of happiness to achieve during adverse situations. Such happiness is due to underlying truth expressed by her every moment no matter whether the circumstances are favorable or unfavorable for her." (Gouli)

In the poetry of Whitman, nature is not only used merely for the pursuit of background setting but to reflect a powerful influence on human thoughts and societal values. In his famous work "Leaves of Grass," Whitman visualizes landscapes that reveal his belief in inherent goodness and natural wisdom. For instance, he states,

"I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars"
(Whitman, "Song of Myself"),

thus, clarifying his belief in the interconnectedness of even the smallest parts of nature and the vast creation of the whole universe. This broader cosmic viewpoint highlights Whitman's ecocritical perspective, highlighting the significance of every natural element within the larger ecological system.

"Whitman and Dickinson transform this remedial, relative, and relational mode of provisionally yielding control into a way of responding poetically to the natural environment, making it the foundation for an environmentally sensitive epistemology." (Gerhardt)

Whitman's poetry goes beyond celebrating the beauty of nature rather it delves into environmental deep concern and human impact on the natural world. In "This Compost," he makes a metaphorical presentation for societal renewal, suggesting that the cycle of life and death in nature illustrates the human experience of growth and transformation. Whitman has always been an ardent advocate of the environment in his criticism of industrialization and urbanization in poems like "To a Locomotive in Winter," where he makes a successful use of personification of the train as a destructive force disrupting the harmony of nature. Through these poems, Whitman not only mirrors the environmental challenges of his time but also inspires readers to redefine their relationship with the natural world and suggests a more harmonious coexistence.

"Whitman's immortality project was to (co-)create America that would live forever in its vibrant youthful state, a perfect image of human vitality

against a stable natural backdrop, even as the techno economic augmentations of that vitality already began to eat away at that backdrop.” (Jurasze)

Whitman's impact on contemporary environmental discussions and literature is significantly important. His wide perspective of nature as a wellspring of creativity, inner revitalization, and ecological interconnectedness has arrested deep concerns in the poets and intellectuals of later generations. Gary Snyder and Mary Oliver, for example, have tuned Whitman's environmental awareness into their own writings, highlighting the significance of ecological awareness and environmental care amidst modern issues like climate change, global warming as well as the decline of biodiversity, etc.

“Whitman that is engaged with the environmental ethics concerns of the twenty-first century, and encourages seeing the more-than-human-world as something that is never “out there” or separate from humans as the term “Nature” has come to denote, but something that the speaker/poet is always inter-subjectively implicated in.” (Syvertsen)

Walt Whitman had a significant role in the thinking of ecocritical through his poetry, showing his deep respect for nature, increasing environmental awareness, and examination of the spiritual aspects of ecological intercommunion. With the use of vivid imagery, philosophical pondering, and lyrical lilt of the natural world, Whitman always inspires readers to rethink their connection with nature and adopt a comprehensive ecological viewpoint. His reputation as a poet of nature and democracy interwoven remains, providing timeless perspectives on the enduring communion between humanity and the natural environment.

“As a man of letters, Whitman’s (re)imagining of nature was predominantly textual, a specific application of the linguistic relationship that humans develop with the so-called ‘environment’ in an attempt to approximate what nature really is, the ‘only possible resolution’ being ‘our final, permanent, (re)union with the landscape outside of the text’ (Outka).

To sum up, Whitman’s exploration of nature enhances our comprehension of his poetry by shedding light on its deep ecological aspects and vow to environmental causes, establishing his literature as a perennial guide creating environmental consciousness and responsibility, both within the realm of literature and beyond.

Ecocritical Study of Kazi Nazrul Islam's Poetry:

Kazi Nazrul Islam, hailed as the "rebel poet" of Bangladesh, composed poetry that defied societal conventions not only vigorously but also deeply reflected upon themes of the natural environment. When viewed through an ecocritical perspective, his poems unveil a strong bond with nature, providing deep insights into the natural world and the ecological challenges that society encounters.

As a matter of fact, Nazrul was a romantic poet, whether one uses the term to refer to revolt, the struggle for unity, the emphasis on emotions, imagination and beauty, or the allusions to or a focus on mysticism, incompleteness, or a certain love of nature, as previously described. His poetry is burdened with the call for revolt against the “brute fact” (Mahmud)

Here is an attempt to delve into Nazrul's environmental awareness, analyzing major poems that emphatically express his ecological concerns.

Kazi Nazrul Islam practically observed the colonial British subjugation of the Indian Subcontinent, especially in The Bengal part. He began writing poetry during a turbulent era significantly marked by social and political changes 'craving for the emancipation of the distressed humanity' (Islam). The aesthetics of decolonisation in Nazrul Islam's work are based on what Eagleton refers to as. "Cultural emancipation of the masses". That is why his poetry frequently and mostly addressed issues of oppression and advocated for freedom. Alongside these topics, his connection to nature was also rooted in deep ecological consciousness. His poetry depicts nature as a place of comfort as well as a stage for fighting for social equality. In his most celebrated poem "Bidrohi" (The Rebel), he made a very significant parallelism between the fight for justice by rebels and the resistance of the natural world against tyrannical oppression

'I'm the tempest I'm the cyclone,
I destroy everything I find in my path
I'm the dance-loving rhythm
I dance to my own beats.' (35-38)

This symbolic comparison upholds Nazrul's belief in nature as a potent influence interconnected with human fates and challenges.

"Nazrul imagines himself as the cyclone, the symbol of destruction; he can destroy everything that comes in his path. He shows an amalgamation of different forces in a rebel who is a destroyer and a preserver, and who expresses wrath as well as beauty and sensitivity." (Langley).

Nazrul's ecocriticism provides a framework for analyzing Nazrul's environmental concerns while examining the connection between literature and the environment. His poetry visualizes landscapes that reveal a profound appreciation for the beauty of nature and its susceptibility to human influence. In the poem "Chiro Shishu" (The Eternal Child), the bond between an innocent child and nature is wondrously depicted, emphasizing the untainted purity of this connection before societal influences. His successful use of natural imagery related to rivers, trees, and animals conveys the natural rapport of the child that suggests an inherent harmony, which stands in contrast to the often-discordant nature deeply rooted in human relationships.

'Nazrul composed extraordinary poems on nature and love and created a sensuous world rich in colour, sound and smell. In his nature-poems, the readers find almost all the flowers available in Bengal. Dissatisfied, Nazrul makes journeys to the Middle East in search of mountains and hills, blooming flowers and singing brooks' (Choudhury)

Nazrul Islam made a very successful symbolic use of nature that mirrors human feelings and societal circumstances. In the poetry "Chhayanat," he portrays superb imagery of the rainy season to represent rebirth and purification, heightening the poet's plea for social change as well as spiritual revival. The interconnection between human life and the natural environment is emphatically expressed by such symbolic expressions. Moreover, Nazrul does not overlook criticisms of environmental destruction by the undue interference of so-called human advancements. The song as well as the poem in 'The River of Fate' (Ekul Bhang Okul Gare in Bengali), he excellently personifies a river to protest against pollution

and exploitation, intensifying an insightful understanding of ecological instability, which demands immediate global attention. The poem as well as song 'Deep in the Sleep' (Ghumiye Geche Chanta Hoie in Bengali) was penned just after the premature death of his four-year-old son Bulbul in 1930. The narrator approaches the retelling with a focus on drawing out elements from nature amidst endless sorrows and loss. The evening-flowers, vines, and leaves lament at the passing of their companion, the nightingale, also known as the bulbul. The nightingale, as a symbol of natural order, adorns the morning-flowers with its sweet melodies. The narrator explains that his son, the nightingale, was tragically killed by a heartless hunter's arrow.

"But his all songs made the flowers to bloom in the morning,
Then which cruel hunter's arrow silenced him?" (Translated by Munir)

As a consequence, it brings utter dismay situation in nature and this is how Nazrul universalizes his grief to the natural harmony. He, with extreme pathos tunes in the following way;

"Oh! No buds tomorrow will be sprouting
From creeping tender vines, O listen! Whose
Melancholic breaths in the leaves murmur!
Flown far away my singing bird, exists
Now only a stark desolate nest there." (Translated by Munir)

Here he expresses sorrow, as no more flower buds would grow from the delicate vines now that his songbird has flown away from its nest. With the bird gone, the nest sits empty. The narrator also urges us to hearken to the sorrowful sighs that filter through the rustling leaves—the entire atmosphere is desolate and mournful! Thus, he makes a wonderful comparison of environmental disorder due to the killing of the bird by the cruelty of the hunter and reminds us that any undue interference will have a grim consequence for the whole of nature resulting in utter consequence of human society at large. Regarding his use of natural symbol;

"His symbols have been extracted from astronomy, geography, religion, mythology, human physique and attributes, and natural forces like flood, thunder, lightning, rain, and quakes." (Rahaman)

Nazrul's fiery voice never overlooks the equal rights of Women to make balance in society. His ecofeminist perspective connects the principles of environmentalism with the pursuit of gender equality, acknowledging the significance of nature and women's place in it. His writings emphasize the subjugation under a patriarchal social structure experienced by both women and the environment, calling for their freedom. Nazrul's literary works always urge for a balanced relationship between human beings and the natural world, stressing the importance of regard, durability, and fairness among all living creatures.

"That era has gone,
In that era no men, women were slaves!
Era of pain, era of human being, era of equal,
None will be captured by none,
If man capture woman, then after that era
Man, himself will die with pain in that prison."

'Nari' (The Women) is one of the most effective poems upholding the sense of respect and his thoughts to establish the equilibrium between rights for both men and women.

"I don't see any difference
Between a man and a woman
Whatever great or benevolent
That are in this world achievements
Half of that was by a woman
The other half by man."

In terms of political, social, religious, and literary perspectives, Mitra discusses Nazrul's dissenting stance. Mitra believes that the poet is of the opinion that. "In his comprehensive rebellion against all orthodoxies, appears to represent a complex microcosm of the entire tradition" (Mitra)

Nazrul's poetic works bear significant contributions in highlighting the looming threats of environmental degradation which enhance global climate change negatively. His poetry serves the purpose of a poignant reminder of the inherent value of nature heightening the deep concern for the conservation of the environment. His promotion of social justice interwoven with ecological concerns plays the pivotal role of environmental justice in ensuring societal well-being. Nazrul's interdisciplinary approach paves the way for rethinking to confront present-day environmental challenges. He artistically presents profound insights into the interactions between humanity and the natural world. His poetic vision reveals a world where a deep understanding of environmental issues, incorporating themes of nature's beauty, resilience, and vulnerability finds an artistic outlet. The present world increasingly facing environmental challenges, Nazrul's poetry works as a compelling reminder of the enduring influence of literature in promoting the necessity of preserving ecological balance and societal change as well.

Whitman, the poet of democracy deals with the vast landscapes of North America in his poetry. "Leaves of Grass," known as his pivotal work is filled with a profound respect for the natural world. His approach towards nature encompasses his transcendentalist belief in the innate goodness of both nature and humanity as a whole. The free verse style mirrors the environment's organic, unstructured beauty of nature. Nature acts, in his poetic world as a reflection of the soul, a source of spiritual rejuvenation, and finally, a symbol where all the living beings are interwoven inseparably. In contrast, Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh mostly known as a rebellious poet, in his poetic realm portrayed a passionate and at times turbulent bond with nature. His poems reflect a profound sense of independence and a refusal to succumb to the restrictions imposed by society and politics. In his poetry, nature is often animated, portraying it as a spectator to human long endurance and unbound suffering. Nazrul Islam's relationship with nature is intricate, mirroring the socio-political unrest of his time, which encompassed themes of conflict, defiance, and the quest for freedom.

Ecocritical Perspectives:

Examining these poets from an ecocritical standpoint would involve looking at how their depiction of nature was shaped by their respective cultural and historical contexts. Nazrul Islam's is with the sense of Bengali nationalism while Whitman is with transcendentalist beliefs but both had an impact on their ecological consciousness. Ecocriticism would also evaluate how these poets challenged the traditional boundaries between nature and culture advocating for a more inclusive understanding of humanity's place in the natural world. Approaching Walt Whitman and Kazi Nazrul Islam through an ecocritical lens

uncovers not only their poetic techniques and thematic concerns but also their joint dedication to delving into the intricate relationship between humankind and the environment. Their poems remain relevant today, serving as a testament to nature's enduring influence on human consciousness and artistic creativity.

Conclusion:

The literary works of both Walt Whitman and Kazi Nazrul Islam uphold a deep connectivity between nature and poetry, providing breeding grounds for an ecocritical analysis. Though the poets are from different ages and social contexts, they both tune the same ecological concern in their poetic works from their respective points of view. Their discoveries of the communion between nature and human beings are inseparable. Whitman portrays nature with his transcendental outlook whereas Nazrul envisions the revolutionary spirit to break the tyrannical claws ensuring social justice. The voice of Nazrul seems to be more vigorous regarding ecological degradation caused by the undue interferences of human civilization and it certainly demands immediate measures to stop ominous consequences in return.

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