

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS, RELIGION AND ROMANTIC POETRY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Man and nature have always shared a close bonding with each other all over the world. In Indian culture and philosophy, all living creatures have existed in perfect harmony with each other. The objects of nature have been worshiped from ancient times and the tradition goes on even in the 21st century. When we celebrate varied cultural festivals in India, we offer our salutations and reverence to Mother Earth and other elements of nature. Our religious customs and rituals are linked to the rivers, mountains, sun, moon and plants. But we cannot deny the modern man's carelessness towards nature too. He has become completely oblivious to the bounties and beauty of nature chasing his materialistic goals. From time to time, Literature has attempted to nudge the wayward man by showing him the righteous path. This paper offers a nuanced study of nature, religion and romantic poetry in general. Selective poetry of William Wordsworth, S T Coleridge and John Keats presents an interesting spectrum. The Key theme addressed in this paper includes the relationship between man and nature and how this bond could be cemented further through creative writing. One may find a panacea to many ecological problems through literature in the present age.

Keywords: Environmental consciousness, religion, Romantic poetry, nature

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 came, danced around viciously, halting the movement of man all around the world. Its psychological and emotional impact on human beings was palpable. The virus affected not only human health but also the socio-economic environment around the world. The pandemic pointed out the repercussions of disturbed ecological balance. The destruction of natural habitats and the wildlife trade have been suggested as factors that may have played a role in the emergence of the virus. Albeit, with lockdowns and travel restrictions, nature heaved a sigh of relief. Mountains, rivers, waterfalls, air and other objects of nature replenished themselves, erasing the scars left by men.

We are at a critical juncture today. Our forests are depleting fast with growing urbanisation. Nature has been created for men. In ancient times, Men and nature were living in perfect harmony. The objects of nature were worshipped. "Bhumi suktah" and "prithvi suktah" were written by our rishis. In Indian philosophy, body is considered made of panch tattvas and so is the universe. The message is clear and that is to live in harmony. Mother is nature. So this kind of holistic and integrated view of living is in the interest of everyone. There are instances in our Upanishads how did men suffer when they hurt nature even unknowingly. In Valmiki Ramayana, there is a reference as to how once Ram shot a bird separating it from its wife. This resulted in his separation from Sita. Birds and animals like Garud, monkeys, and squirrels live in tandem with men in our epics. Even stones coming to life in these stories proved that even the smallest element of nature deserves our attention. From ancient times, nature and men have lived in harmony.

In Mahabharat, there is a reference to 'Khandavaprastha', a forest

land which is given to Pandavas in lieu of their share in ancestral land. When this forest was cleared and burnt in order to build a palace for Pandavas, countless birds, insects and animals lost their natural habitat in the process, thereby bringing a curse to the Kauravas. This ecological disturbance created a lot of chaos. The message is loud and clear that whenever the ecological balance is disturbed, it is bound to bring disaster for men. C Rajagopalachari writes in his famous book "Mahabharata", chapter xviii "The Saranga Birds":

"In the stories narrated in the Puranas. Birds and beasts speak like men, and sometimes they give sound advice and even teach sound wisdom. But the natural qualities of those creatures are adroitly made to peep through this human veil." (80)

Later, Guru Nanak wrote - Pawan guru, pani pita, mata dharat mahat, meaning thereby that Air is our teacher, water is our father and the great sacred earth is our mother. He also says - Balihari kudrat vasaya, tera ant naa jae lakhya. It means that God lives in nature and this fact cannot be written or described in words. In classical literature in East or West, nature and human nature reflect each other's realities and consciousness.

So the question is - how have we gone wrong paving the way for our destruction? Man is slowly losing his reverence for nature. With the growth of Industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation, he has indulged himself in expanding, developing and building concrete structures, violating nature on a colossal level. In his greed, he has disturbed eco-sustainability inviting serious interrogation.

In English literature, the romantic poets in the early nineteenth century felt this loss to a great extent. With industrialisation in England, people's love and care for nature diminished to a great extent. Exodus towards cities, materialism, the widening gulf between the rich and poor, and capitalism marked the sensibilities of the times. Then the sensitive poets like William Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley took the cudgels in their hands and beckoned people back to nature. They wrote in simple day-to-day language so that people could connect with their poetry.. Nature, imagination, dream element, and lyricism were the common characteristics of this new poetry. The prominent poets of the Romantic age sought an escape through nature. The treatment of nature may be different in each poet of this Age but nature finds a prominent role in the poetry of all of these poets

The publication of "Lyrical Ballads" in 1798 blasted the classical notions of writing poetry. Wordsworth and Coleridge were hailed as the two great poets ushering in a fresh whiff of air. Wordsworth was a great lover of nature from his childhood. His love for nature passed through different stages as he grew up. Earlier it was a simple boy's love of nature, the one who would dress up in colourful worn-out clothes, go to the orchards and fill his pockets with fruits. Then this simple boy's love turned into a sensuous love of nature. To quote from the anthology "Fifteen Poets," he writes in his famous poem "Tintern Abbey":

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood. . .
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; (237)

Gradually in the third phase of his journey, he learned to look at nature in maturer way as he realised :

The still sad music of humanity
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. . .(237)

Wordsworth believed that there is a soul in nature:

I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime. (237)

Wordsworth strongly felt that nature did never betray the heart that loved her. We definitely feel recharged after a brief sojourn in nature after a hectic mundane, monotonous routine of life. His concern for insensitive man resonates with us in 21st century when he writes in the poem "The world is too much with us":

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! (239)

Who can forget the spectacle of thousands of daffodils flashing upon his inward eyes in the moment of solitude? For this and for everything , we have become out of tune giving way to an array of physical and mental diseases in our life. Disgusted with the prevalent corruption in church in England, the poet preferred to be called a pagan:

Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; (240)

Doesn't this frustration and anxiety resonate with us in the present times of religious fanaticism in the world? It would not be an exaggeration to say that Nature seems to be the answer to all the maladies of the world to the poet then, and to us now.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge creates a willing suspension of disbelief in nature through his poetry. His vivid description of supernatural elements in nature. In his long and famous poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", he creates a ghostly eeriness in the atmosphere that is palpable. Comparing the enormity of the sea and smallness of man, he writes :

Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink. (260)

He also has a message to pass on to the modern men:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (275)

The fact that we have to show our love and reverence to all living creatures, whether big or small, is a great instruction for the present generation living in the times of disturbed ecological symmetries. In "Kubla Khan", the joy is visible that one derives from the company of nature:

It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice! (276)

John Keats was another prominent poet of this age who had a profound love for nature, and this is evident in his poetry. He believed that nature was the ultimate source of beauty. In "Endymion", he writes:

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing. (364)

This sensuousness gave way to a maturer understanding of nature when John Keats started believing in negative capability. He admitted that Autumn can be as beautiful as Spring. Life is not full of beauty and laughter ever. It is made of all shades. Through the metaphor of nature, Poet makes peace with his otherwise, tumultuous life. In the ode "To Autumn", he describes the season thus:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run. (363)

Instead of asking for the songs of spring, he learns to listen to the autumn's music too. As Shakespeare says - Ripeness is all. Readiness is all. It was the maturity of mind which compelled the poet to take things in his stride with patience and calmness. This perspective dawned on him through all shades of nature.

In "Ode to A Nightingale", he seeks an escape from harsh realities of his life through nature:

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country-green,
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth (360)

The poet was afflicted with incurable tuberculosis which was running in the family. His beloved Fanny Browne had not reciprocated his love. His calibre as a poet was not taken seriously by the critics. All that the poet craved for himself was the company of nature, books, fruit, French wine, fine weather and a little music out of doors, played by somebody he did not know. So nature came as a saviour to him. Isn't this earnest longing seem to appeal to the modern young heart wearied by the mundane struggles of life? Therefore, nature may offer succour to man in any age or time. It is a perennial source of joy.

Keats believed in nature's ability to evoke emotions that inspire creativity. He reminds us of the importance of connecting with nature and the impact it can have on our life..The gentle call of streams and the whispering of leaves soothe him.

In fact, the world of nature is full of magic, we only need to sharpen our senses mindfully to appreciate the grandeur of mountains, listen to the melodious music of waterfalls and absorb the beauty of starry sky. Nature is always there for us, giving away her positivity and energy. It is only us who have become oblivious of this age old companion. The beauty of nature is nothing if there is no one to appreciate it. W H Davies in "Leisure" writes beautifully:

What is this life if, full of care,

We have no time to stand and stare?—

No time to stand beneath the boughs,

And stare as long as sheep and cows:

No time to see, when woods we pass,

Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass: (26)

In a letter to his beloved, Fanny Brawne in 1819, John Keats wrote:

"I almost wish we were butterflies and liv'd but three summer days—three such days with you I could fill with more delight than fifty common years could ever contain."

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CONCLUSION

One may say that literature shows us the way to live a meaningful life. It is a powerful tool for promoting ecological awareness among the masses. Nature refreshes us even today. Nature is not just something to be admired from afar, but its magic can be experienced and enjoyed on a personal level. By spending time in nature, we find peace, inspiration, and a renewed sense of wonder, just as these poets did. With climate change, pollution, and deforestation, we are in danger of losing some of the most beautiful aspects of nature.. Nature poetry reminds us of the importance of preserving sensitivity to nature. This bond of affinity has suffered a huge setback that needs to be revived. We have to return to our roots to get peace and balance. Religious texts and literature have a humongous power to inspire man through poetry and storytelling. These creative and emotive tools may go a long way to arouse environmental consciousness.

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