Human Supremacy in the Digital Age: The Evolution of Eco-criticism and Green Thought in 21st Century English Literature

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper attempts to examine the transforming vista of Eco-criticism and Green Thought within English literature, highlighting its transition from a secondary interpretive framework to a universal theme in the discourse of the 21st-century. Considering the current trends in English Literature, the study underscores how contemporary authors are increasingly moving away from human-centred storytelling to adopt eco-centric perspectives. Here, nature is positioned not merely as a background but is included as an active, dynamic force that shapes narratives and the evolution of character.

Using a critical analytical approach of varied literary forms that includes contemporary novels, poetry, and the latest evolving "cli-fi" (climate fiction), the paper studies recurring themes such as climate change, environmental degradation, and ecological justice. It highlights a substantial change in current literature, which is moving towards integrating indigenous ecological wisdom and decolonized approaches. Through this, the change appears to reflect a broader global effort to promote sustainable practices and environmental management. Besides, the study explores the increasing interdisciplinarity of the field, linking literary analysis to the broader environmental humanities and digital era transformations like "eco-blogging" and "biomimicry". Eventually, the paper contends that English literature in today's era acts as a transformative space for dialogue, challenging unsustainable practices and playing a crucial role in fostering global environmental ethics and engagement.

KEYWORDS:

Eco–criticism, Green Thought, Anthropocentrism, Eco–centricity, Climate Fiction, Environmental Justice, Sustainability.

Over the last three decades, Ecocriticism has emerged as a field of literary study that examines how humans interact with nonhuman nature or the environment in literature (Johnson, Loretta). Today, with the development and expansion of ecocritical studies, any line between human and nonhuman nature has necessarily blurred (Santra, Shishir). Ecocriticism emerges from the traditional approach to literature, in which the critic studies the local, the global, the material, the physical, the historical, or the natural history within the context of a work of art. As an interdisciplinary approach, it invokes the knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, the social sciences, and cultural studies (Johnson, Loretta).

"Green thoughts" refers to environmentally conscious thinking about sustainability and nature. It also encompasses ideas and actions that help preserve the planet, reduce waste, and promote sustainability for future generations. In literature and ecocritical theory, green thought denotes a paradigm shift centered on the relationship between human beings and the non–human world, aiming to foster environmental consciousness, sustainability, and an ecocentric perspective over traditional anthropocentrism (Soares, Sofia Jacob). It involves interpreting literature from an ecological perspective, acknowledging nature as an active agent rather than a passive backdrop, and analyzing how texts can inspire activism in the face of environmental crises.

In ecocritical analysis, anthropocentrism, or human–centered storytelling, refers to narratives in which the natural world is portrayed as an inert backdrop for human drama rather than as an active participant. Secondary interpretive frameworks, for instance, the pastoral and georgic traditions, provide perspectives through

which writers have historically situated human–nature relationships. The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya are examples of this kind of human–centered storytelling, in which environmental degradation and human survival in relation to nature are depicted primarily.

In contrast, contemporary English literature increasingly features ecocentric perspectives that challenge the anthropocentric point of view by portraying nature as an active force, character, and interrelated system with fundamental values. The Overstory (2018) by Richard Powers, The Hungry Tide (2004) by Amitav Ghosh, and Graham Swift's Waterland (1983) are key examples of this trend. Instead of using nature as a simple backdrop, modern authors are making it an agent, transforming the environment into a dynamic character that drives the plot. In The Overstory, Richard Powers states: "Trees are the true protagonists, serving as long–lived witnesses to the human condition and possessing their own agency." Nature is no longer just a setting; it is a dynamic narrative force that shapes plotlines and character identities, as in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide, where he depicts the Sundarbans as a living entity that actively influences human lives (Peyma, Nasser Dasht).

Today, a growing number of works have been adopting non–human, post–human, or "more–than–human" perspectives to question the assumed superiority of humans and emphasize the interconnectedness of all life forms.

Jeff VanderMeer's Annihilation (2014), part of the Southern Reach Trilogy, stands as a stark example of this perspective. It uses a bizarre and mutating natural environment ("Area X") to explore human self–destructive tendencies and the potential for a larger, non–human paradigm of creative destruction and ecological change, challenging human understanding and control.

Writers such as Ruth Ozeki and Karen Joy Fowler investigate how patriarchal power dynamics parallel the exploitation of the environment from an ecofeminist perspective. Works by Arundhati

Roy and Amitav Ghosh highlight how colonial exploitation and globalization disproportionately affect the ecology of the Global South.

The other new genre that has come up, of late, is the 'Cli-fi' or the climate fiction. Examples include dystopian futures like Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake, societal collapse narratives such as Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower, near-future ecological thrillers like Paolo Bacigalupi's The Windup Girl, and contemporary explorations like Kim Stanley Robinson's The Ministry for the Future, all focusing on climate change impacts on humanity and the planet. The Drowned World by J.G. Ballard (1962) is another narrative elucidating a post-flood world where humanity regresses. Then, there's Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood (2003) that explores genetic engineering, corporate power, and environmental collapse in a dystopian future.

"Valli", the novel by Sheela Tomy, originally written in Malayalam (2019), translated to English by Jayasree Kalathil (2022), also resonates with a similar ecocritical vibration and socio-political and indigenous cultural backdrop.

Here's an analysis of 'Valli", which has been studied for its ecocritical perspectives, and the integration of indigenous ecological wisdom and decolonized approaches:

Kalluvayal is a village in the Western Ghats and the home of "Valli"'s characters (Shankar, Karthik). Nestled in the forested mountains of Wayanad, dissected by the Kabini river and its tributaries, is the utopian village of Kalluvayal, the setting for Sheela Tomy's dazzling debut novel, "Valli". Translated from the Malayalam original by Jayasree Kalathil, "Valli", a sensory jumble (and jungle) of the ecological, ethnographic, sociological, folkloric, and Biblical, offers something for disparate readers. The polysemous word '"Valli"' that makes up the novel's title means vine, earth, young women, and wages (Ayidh, Isa).

The novel spans four decades, chronicling the ecological destruction and social changes in the fictional village of Kalluvayal from the 1970s up to the 2018 floods. It was shortlisted for the 2022 JCB Prize for Literature (Santra, Shishir).

The story of life in the region is told through various characters in the novel such as Thomas, Sara, Isabella, Padmanabhan, Joseph, Susan, Basavan, Peter, Lucy and Tessa, amongst many others. It has autobiographical elements in that Tomy seems to be telling her own story and the story around the place she once lived.

"Valli" treats the land not as a passive setting but as a living entity, as the main protagonist. It highlights "bioregional" values, showing that the identity of the inhabitants is intimately linked to the specific, local ecology of the Western Ghats. The novel employs myths, folklore, and diaries to create, as the author calls it, a "forest of allegory," preserving the memory of the landscape.

"Valli" describes what happens when the ill–famed triumvirate of corrupt politicians, land sharks, and bribe–hungry bureaucrats joins forces to misappropriate and take what rightfully belongs to the people. As humanity advances, the concepts of "progress" and "development" frequently manifest as a heavy toll on the natural world, particularly at the expense of non–human species. As Tomy writes: "Ever so slowly, the forest cleared, and the porcupine, the sloth bear, the wild boar, the pangolin, the civet, the anteater, the snake, the mongoose, the hare, the peacock, the muntjac, and thousands of other creatures withdrew deeper and deeper into the jungle." (Tomy, 1)

The novel highlights the resilience of the local community, particularly the Adivasis, against the capitalist forces that commodify nature. It calls for an "epistemic revival," validating indigenous knowledge systems and the Paniya community's spiritual, sustainable, and respectful relationship with the forest.

Nature is personified and blissfully converged into the

narrative by considering it as the main protagonist. These lines exemplify that: "Sometime much later, somehow, as the hills began to withdraw into the earth and the paddy fields began to disappear, far–hill and near–hill became strangers. But Kalluvayal remains, even today, its rivers thin, its forests bald. A land where countless secrets sleep in the vast stone structures and deep caves left behind by Stone Age humans."

"Valli" advocates against unchecked development and tourism, the constant commercialisation and plunder of the land. Tomy, who belongs to the same region, makes this loss personal. She mourns the land and how it's been forced not only to change but metamorphose (Vishnoi, Rahul). "Eventually, the scent of cashews faded, and in its place, the rousing fragrance of coffee wafted across the land. Ripe coffee berries fell like coral beads across the leaf–littered hillsides, heralding another time of plenty. More things came up the hills – rubber, black pepper, ginger – and through it all, paddy fields in shades of green and gold lay fecund in the valleys, ushering in harvest seasons smelling of kaima rice." (Tomy, 2)

The narrative delves into the lives of settlers and locals, covering themes of love, loss, and the changing social dynamics. The character of Kalluvayal itself acts as a living, breathing, yet dying character. In the chapter 'I am the forest', Tomy fictionally entails how the forest responds to the destruction, degradation, and exploitation of nature. The writer makes it very touching and appealing by including forest as a speaker. Here, the character Padmanabhan is used to project the plight of the forest:

"There must come a time when each of us is able to hear the forest weep, a time when the languages of the forest and the humans will become one, a time when the axe and the chainsaw will disappear from the face of the earth. When the time comes, human beings will learn to love the earth and one another. In that time, the forest will bloom to the sound of human laughter, and it will tell us

that every life, however small or delicate as the touch-me-not, is divine. It is for you, my children, that the forest weeps." (Tomy, 147)

Again, through the character of Basavan, nature's voice is heard:

"'Ingu baa... Vottinurukkumi engaley!' Basavan roared. Come on then, cut us down. The forest shuddered, birds flapped their wings and rose to the sky, anxious creepy crawlies withdrew into bushes and crevasses. A confused Toto stood by Basavan's leg and scratched his head. It was the language of the forest that Basavan spoke, the language of the countless living things in the forest. Perhaps that was why, when he roared, the forest roared with him, the fig, the vennilavu, the kunni with its coral beads and the rosewood cried out loud, the leaves showered down to the ground, the animals took up the lament." (Tomy, 150)

The chapter 'The parable of the mustard seed' begins with: "The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." (Tomy, 317) Thus, in every sense, the whole novel is filled with instances to show the liveliness of the forest and its inhabitants. It also highlights the relationship between the forest and the indigenous population of people around it.

The concept of Environmental Justice plays a crucial role in the novel, demonstrating that justice extends not only to people but also to the environment, which has the right to live, seek justice, and claim its rightful place. One of the slogans is an illustration of the protest:

"Stick-in-the-muds, back right off
It's jobs and progress we speak of!"

Then, there is:

"For a piece of yam, a knot of tobacco
You can't scam us any more
Not for "Valli", not for paddy
You can't work us any more
Ours this soil, ours alone!" (Tomy, 173–174)

Also ingrained in the novel, is the cultural mindscape of songs and poems, both of the migrant Christian community and the Adivasi people.

While the novel concludes with: "A red wind takes up. On top of the hills, vines burst forth from the soil and clamber over the trees, returning Kalluvayal to the majestic forest of its ancient being." (Tomy, 389), there is an epilogue titled 'Unniyachi's Facebook Post', pointing to the merciless nature's fury that took over Kalluvayal in August 2018, how the floods ravaged the entire region, drowning everything that was found in its way.

The essence of this novel reiterates that nature is inherent in each one of us and can take any shape or form to represent itself. Thus, like '"Valli"', there are many ecologically sensitive, environmentally delineated fictional works and 'cli–fi' fictions proposing that nature is positioned not merely as a background but is included as an active, dynamic force that shapes narratives and the evolution of character.

The new concepts of "eco–blogging" and "biomimicry" focus on environmental sustainability, educating readers on sustainable practices, promoting eco–friendly products, and advocating for planet–conscious actions. It often features topics like zero–waste living, climate change, and green technology, with bloggers acting as advocates for a healthier planet. Biomimicry, which literally means 'imitation of the living,' aims to take inspiration from natural selection solutions adopted by nature and translate the principles to human engineering. The biomimicry approach aims to favor "choices" tested by nature, which had millions of years to understand what works best and what doesn't (macemc9). These are certain

nouveau concepts that are being intricately included in certain 'cli-fi' fictional novels as well as ecocritical works of literature today.

Thus, digital transformation has rendered today's novels much closer to readers and reality than ever before, venturing to educate them rather than just entertaining or engaging them in older storytelling practices.

Thus, it may be essentially concluded from the above study that, in today's era, English Literature acts as a transformative space for dialogue, challenging unsustainable environmental, social, cultural, political, and other practices. It thus plays a crucial role in fostering global environmental ethics and engagement.

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