

Ecofeminist Reading of J.G. Ballard's the Drowned World

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Abstract

This paper attempts to find Ecofeminist elements in *The Drowned world*, a novel written by J.G. Ballard published in 1962 which was the time where there was no such theory called Ecocriticism or nature writing was evolved and spoken about. Interestingly the author presents a dystopian world in which nature's balance is lost, world is becoming just a water body, human and other mammals extinct, only reptiles extant. The dominant presence of reptiles make the characters feel so disgusting and the human community had to face many difficulties along with the ecological collapse. The major characters those who still believe in technology try to find a solution with the help of technology. The novel ends with nature's triumph and human fail in their attempt to win over the nature. This article shall focus on the Ecofeminist elements present in the novel and interpret the novel under Nature Ecofeminist perspective with particular reference to Beatrice Dhal the only woman character in the novel. She is remarkable, nature like and shares a lot of characteristics of nature. Her interconnectedness with nature provides considerable similarities with Ecofeminist ideologies. Hence the research paper shall focus on the character of Beatrice Dhal and her innate connection to her environment. This article shall be an analytical research with reference to the data available in the internet and from the books relevant to this study.

Keywords: J.G. Ballard, Ecocriticism, disorder, dystopian, The Drowned world, apocalyptic novels & Ecofeminism

Introduction

The Drowned World was published in 1962, which was the time when Ecocriticism or Nature Studies was not evolved as a school thought. The novel can be classified as an apocalyptic novel. The term is evolved from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The earliest apocalyptic works were found in Jewish origin. Apocalyptic literature foretells the disastrous, threatening, chaotic, dangerous or events that may happen or event which can lead the world to its end. To name a few early books of apocalypse: The Book of Daniel (chapter 7 to 12), The fourth Book of Ezra, second and third book of Baruch, in The New Testament the Revelation, Apocalypse of Peter, Apocalypse of Paul, Ascension of Isaiah of John and the Testament of Abraham.

Though apocalypse genre was no more popular after the middle Ages, in early nineties it has become a style of writing generally prophetic and visionary. Romantic and gothic literatures were following the tradition of apocalyptic writing. Mary Shelly and Edgar Alen Poe are the few names which followed the tradition of apocalyptic writing style. Particularly after World War I, the writers' imagination touched even the end of the world.

Though ninetieth century is known for the domestic and regional novels, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were writers emerging with extreme imagination and innovation which paved way to the emergence of science fiction. Impact of science was felt in every aspect of life including literature. Early science fiction writers include H.G. Wells, Samuel Buckset, Joseph Conrad, Cormac McCarthy, John Masfield, Irvine Welsh, Ford Madox Ford, J.G. Ballard etc. Among these writers a few were identified as apocalyptic writers and later when their ideas were supported with the scientific data this style of writing is called post-apocalyptic.

J. G. Ballard, novelist, short story writer and essayist is an author of more than forty novels and hundreds of short stories who was earlier referred to as an apocalyptic writer then post-apocalyptic and now, he has been identified

as an author of early science fiction and climate fiction, now shortly Cli-Fi. Literature is ever new as it allows any suitable theory to be applied to evolve a new meaning to it time to time. David Cunningham in his obituary writes about the Post apocalyptic novels of Ballard:

While Ballard's own early S-F novels belong most clearly to a genre of post apocalypse – 'visions of world cataclysm' depicted in a hallucinatory but sharply focused landscape of deserted half-ruined buildings and desolate natural terrains – they are also marked by an attention to landscape itself, as a generator and manifestation of unconscious collective drives, indicative of his debts to the 'modern mythology' of surrealism and to its Lautréamont-like conjunction of scientific and poetic imagery (David 2).

Among his many novels, *The Drowned World* gains much popularity due to the latest development in the field of ecology and climate studies. The novel deals with the flooded land which completely alters the life due to the raise of ocean levels. The novel has no conventional plot structure, and the events in the novel are set in 2145. The disrupted ecological balance of the Earth has been a major theme in the novel. Everything else is disturbed in the Earth; no human life was possible except in the polar circles; the whole landscape is just a water body, the buildings were seen only from the sixth floor of the buildings. Dr. Robert Kerans is part of a scientists group whose mission is to research and find a solution or in the flooded city of London which never happens.

The researcher found that a few research papers were written on the same work only on the damages caused by the ecological disorder not many from the Ecofeminist perspective. So this article analyses how the novel *The Drowned World*, reveals the relationship and interdependency of nature and other living organisms including human beings. Geographical space as an indispensable phenomenon of survival becomes just a big water body with a lot of disgusting reptiles and heat waves. This paper brings out the dangers and aftermaths of ecological collapse from an Ecofeminist perspective and end of the earth in an imagination.

Ecofeminism: A theoretical framework

Ecofeminism as a sub-genre of ecocriticism, emerged in 1970s, is constantly growing and updating. Ecological concerns and feminist ideas merged to make 'Ecological Feminism' or 'Ecofeminism' is a term coined by a French feminist Françoise Eaubonne in 1974. Radical Ecofeminism and Cultural Ecofeminism are the two major types of Ecofeminism. Cultural Ecofeminist explores the interlinked connection between woman and nature. They consider woman and nature equally for their gender roles. Gender roles may include reproduction, nurturing and lactation. Nature Ecofeminism as a critical thought, fall under the cultural Ecofeminism. More than a theory it is a philosophical thought. Ecofeminism connects ecological ideas with feminist critical views. This philosophy emphasises and explores how nature and woman share common characteristics and the way both woman and natures are treated inferior by the male gendered patterns. There is always an invisible relationship between nature and woman in all cultures and in all times. It may differ according to the culture and aesthetic system of a country and its geographical condition. Woman's relationship with nature is something intuitive and spiritual. Scholar James relevantly writes "Ecofeminists believe that women interact with the environment in a spiritual, nurturing and intuitive manner" (James).

Ecofeminists feel ecological problem as their problem. Eco critics are critical about anthropocentrism whereas Eco feminists examine anthropocentric social values in which the nature and woman are treated inferior. Rachel Carson in her book *Silent Spring* penned not only the basic idea of Ecofeminism but also, she pointed out the harmful impact of excessive use of pesticides in the environment. The academic Mary Mellor views that nature is exploited and degraded and women are subordinated and oppressed. In *Ecofeminism*, Vandana Shiva writes that without colonising woman and land, the colonisation could never have happened. Thus woman and all forms of nature are closely interconnected.

There were a few remarkable ecological movements led by women which gained much attention around the globe. In 1973, to safeguard the Himalayan forests, thereby to safeguard their livelihoods a group of indigenous Indian women started the Chipko Movement (D). Greta Thunberg from UK, India Logan Relay of New Zealand, Nakabuye Hilda F of Uganda, Ridhima Pandey of India, and many other environmental women activists have created a greater sensation around the world. Bennet Barbara in his article wrote, Ecofeminism as a school of thought touches:

On subjects as diverse nature-based religion: animal rights; woman's rights; environmental worries about water, land, air pollution, wildlife conservation: and the oppression of the world countries and people by United Nations and other industrial nations" (Bennett).

Ecofeminist reading of *the Drowned World*

Amidst the chaotic earth condition, Robert Kearns and his assistant Alan Bodkin carry out the geological and biological study, hoping to retrieve the survival in London. They observe a lot of the drastic changes happening in the earth. They could find the flora and fauna evolving as it was predicted by scientists earlier. They witnessed the diminishing of the mammals including human, in the novel, there is no news of any new birth. They could see excessive produce of the reptiles and lizards and they watch the human activity. Giant sized mosquitoes were seen by them, and they caused malaria. As the novel progresses there were enormous alligators. Almost at the end the land is filled with many snakes. The characters give up one after another the possibility of survival there except only one-woman character called Beatrice Dhal.

Beatrice Dhal is the only one-woman character in the novel. She is a character who is much like nature. Nature's influence on human beings and human life is a common theme in literature and in our lives. In William Wordsworth's many poems he considers nature as his teacher, friend, philosopher and even a mirror ("Ecocriticism | Literary Theory | the Nature of Writing"). Robert Frost, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson etc. are the major writers whose works influence the psyche of the readers. These writers proved that, nature is not something passive it is an active agent; it affects and effects human behaviour. Robert Korans says, 'Beatrice can be difficult sometimes ... she is a complex person, and she lives in different levels' (Ballard and Amis). In this novel, Beatrice shares a lot of common elements from the present situation. Beatrice becomes the invisible part not only of nature but also the chaos.

Ecofeminist affirms that "Valuing one kind of life over another will keep the hierarchy firmly entrenched, leaving traditionally defined 'male' qualities, physical power, mechanistic ability, analytical and linear thinking to be affirmed over 'female' qualities-empathy, sensuality, and emotion" (Bennet 64). Beatrice perfectly fits in the above qualities whereas Robert Kerans and other male characters share the above mentioned qualities.

All the human population moved to north or south solar poles for the survival. Beatrice who lives in her grandfather's apartment does not want to leave. She does not come out her apartment and she does not want to leave London at any circumstances. She comfortably reclines on the chair and has her drink. J.G. Ballard's description closely connects her with nature and animal world. He describes her, "Beatrice Dhal lay back on the deck-chairs, her long oiled body gleaming in the shadows like a sleeping python" (25). The author compares her to python. It connotes negatively it can be interpreted as so seductive and dangerous. This is highly symbolic to connect the condition of the earth and Beatrice as it is presented in the novel.

She even has nightmares of jungle, and she was learning ABC in her dreams which shows her spiritual or some mysterious connection with nature and primitive past. In the novel men fight with nature and lose the battle one after another. Kerans' misses his compass and search for it seriously which represents search for meaning, his sense of self and his dependency on manmade objects against nature. On the contrary Beatrice ignores all the men proposed chances of leaving the place. Robert and Riggs insist her to get in to a helicopter but she refuses. She doesn't want to fight against the nature to survive. Her sense of belonging and memories of the past make her feel, not to go out of the place. She feels herself one with the ecology.

Riggs warns Beatrice on the possibility of increase of temperature to 130 degrees soon. He further talks about the running out of fuel for generator and moving of equator rain belts. He alerts her about the possibility of pool water boiling there by producing excessive heat; possibility of sleeplessness; danger of getting type X Pole skin cancer. Colonel also alerts about the dangers she may get from lagoons. Hearing all the predictions she says, "I will keep the door locked, colonel" (27). At the end of this discussion Beatrice asks Kerans whether he would stay with her. He answers, "Adam had no aesthetic sense, or he would have realised that Eve was a pretty haphazard piece of work" (28). Beatrice is emotional rather Kerans is logical and rational even in thinking. Almost all the other characters in the novel relay and believe in technology and manmade objects. They try to overpower nature and

Beatrice is the only one character who accepts all the changes in the environment. The novel ends with the failure attempt of all men in ruling the earth and ruling Beatrice.

Kearns believes in his theory of 'Neuronics' which believes the melting of past, present, and future together. All his attempts and research results are based on his belief in his theory. On the contrary Beatrice and Hardman live in the deep sense of past. At the end of the novel Kerans decides to leave the place, Beatrice says, "Darling where are you going? I am sorry I can't be with you" (165). She decides to stay in her apartment knowing the fact the survival is impossible there. It shows her sense of acceptance and love for her place is remarkable.

Ballard's language is highly symbolic. The catastrophic setting of the novel parallels with unstable and complex characterisation of Beatrice. The degeneration of the earth parallels with that of Beatrice also losing her moral and physical strength. Ballard describes that the earth is going backward to Triassic Age. Similarly Beatrice also goes backward to the past time mentally. It can be concluded that the author presents, Beatrice and the Earth with equal qualities and characteristics.

Conclusion

The novel gives warning news to the humanity under an apocalyptic setting. Author is a seer who foresees the future of the earth. Ballard's projection of end of the earth is surely an alarm to humanity. The present-day happening around the globe proves the projection of the novel is not just an imagination but, was a prophesy shared by Ballard.

The ecofeminist view of the novel helps one to understand the connection between woman and nature. It also provides a different perspective to read and interpret the novel. This research work brings out the theoretical fact that woman and nature are intrinsically connected. It further alerts the humanity about treating nature and woman respectfully.

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