

Ecocriticism and Ecophobia: A Personal Reading

Abstract: The term ecophobia is defined as an irrational fear of home while in ecocriticism it refers to an irrational (often hysterical) and groundless hatred of the natural world. Literature and nature relationship has been studied from various perspectives but work on the two-way relationship between geography and literature is yet scarce. Ecophobia is rooted in anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism and the way we use and write about our surrounding gives hints about our ecophobic attitudes. In this paper, I discuss the relationship between ecocriticism and ecophobia and then comment on ecocriticism and ecophobia with examples from literary texts.

Keywords: Ecophobia, ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, fear, horror

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I have a **sin of fear**, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall **perish on the shore**;
But swear by Thyself, that at my death Thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And having done that, Thou hast done;
I fear no more.

(from *The Hymn to God the Father*, Donne 2007: 470)

In clinical psychology, the term ecophobia refers to “an irrational fear of home” while in ecocriticism it refers to “an irrational (often hysterical) and groundless hatred of the natural world, or aspects of it (Estok 2005: 112). Ecophobia is all about fear of a loss of agency and control to nature and includes the doings of all stakeholders working in personal hygiene industry, cosmetics such as beauticians and barbers and city landscapers who have “passion for covering up Nature's flaws” be it hair, body odor or city's landscape (Estok 2009: 208). As such, it signifies humans' cultural touch on what is already there in their own nature as well as what is already out there in the universe.

Ecophobia is rooted in and dependent on anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism (Estok 2009: 216) and with this firm standpoint in mind, a special role is assigned to the study of ecophobia in a way to extend literary theory to daily life as ecocritics are not only writing in their corners but by participating in local politics and pursuing socially responsible opportunities they are “writing, filming, painting, singing, dancing, performing, organizing, and in other ways challenging ecophobia, economic globalization, and corporate governance” (Gaard 2010: 659). Keeping these in mind, in this particular paper, I discuss the relationship between ecocriticism and ecophobia while giving examples from literary texts to articulate such relationship.

Anecdotes written by Brothers Grimm include “motifs with real horror” (Cholokashvili 2014: no page). For example, aspects of nature such as apples and snakes appear in these tales in a way to create fear of aspects of nature. In one story authors write “Take out an apple for yourself.” And while the little boy was leaning over, the Evil One prompted her, and crash! She slammed down the lid, and his head flew off, falling among the red apples.” Also, they write: “The wicked step-mother was taken before the judge, and put into a barrel filled with boiling oil and venomous snakes, and died an evil death” (Cholokashvili 2014: no page). In both passages, aspects of nature such as the apples or the snakes are associated with venom, head chopping, and death in a way to warn children about these aspects of nature.

Not only in children's literature, but also in canonical, hence, supreme literature, we see that nature is ascribed negativity. Estok "briefly analyzes Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Coriolanus* in order to illustrate the social and environmental causes that often give rise to the expression of ecophobia in literary and cultural texts" (Mackenzie and Posthumus 2013: 760). Although showing ecophobia in canonical texts is noteworthy, it is disturbing to remember that we are already exposed to stories and fairy tales when we were children.

Romantics were known to express their amazement with nature more than anyone else both before and after them. One of the early poets of Romantic poetry, Wordsworth's (1805, 2001: 1) *The Prelude* opens in a way to show the poet's reverence for nature:

OH, there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky; it beats against my cheek,
And seems half conscious of the joy it gives.

The relationship between literature and nature has been studied from various perspectives among which the two-way relationship between geography and literature is the most obvious one. As Singh articulates, black Americans are curious about the land of their origins as they constantly ask the meaning of Africa to themselves since they were "brought to the shores of America in chains, the black American is vastly different from the white races, who came to America in search of a 'promised land' in search of freedom and prosperity" (Singh 2011: no page). As this example shows, the shores and the land have symbolic meanings for these two groups of people. While the shores symbolically speak for African Americans' separation from their homeland, Africa, the promised land, that is a biblical allusion, represents whites' geographical destiny. According to Ruekert (1996) humans' interest in being the sovereign of nature can be traced back to Christianity which is the most human-centered religion in the world, permitting humans to exploit nature as they wish. Ecophobia enters into the discussion at this point since, when Estok's use of the term signals, the term comes with "anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism."

The difference between these groups' motives while coming to America not only shows the obvious (racial) speciesism stemming from white men's enslavement of their black counterparts, but also the religious tone of such difference gives additional superiority to the white men, making them carry a celestial goal in contrast to those pagan Africans who didn't have such celestial motives. Regardless of the difference between their motives, the inseparability of geography, thus nature, from their motives in coming to America is obvious.

One critical question that should be interrogated within this discussion concerns the emotional burden of these two groups' past experiences on their collective conscience, within this geography (nature) bound prime mobile of these two groups. For instance, how do blacks and whites carry the symbolic imagery associated with the shores and the land? What do these natural occurrences (the shores and the land) mean to them as they interact with their nearby surroundings in America? And especially when literature is concerned, what are the traces of these geography-bound historical experiences in various literary texts? While answering such questions, how ecocriticism is perceived becomes important since the question, in fact, is:

whether the movement should be, at base, ecocentric or anthropocentric: should protection of the environment be undertaken as a good in and of itself or should it be undertaken because of its use to humanity? (Estok 2005: 111).

Looking back at early American literature, it could draw attention to Puritan conceptions of the New England landscape as a hideous and desolate wilderness," in William Bradford's famous words (Hillard 2009, 692). However, it is paradoxical that this same hideous and desolate wilderness was "the promised land" for these people. Hence, people's conception of geography has changed throughout history, all the while our 'fight' with nature has continued.

American transcendentalists were soon to follow them in their reverence for nature. Emerson's (cited in Cooke 1903: no page) poetry shows his and his like-minded poets' insistence on the interconnectedness of human life with nature as the poet yields himself (human) to the perfect whole (nature):

The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath,
Running over the club-moss burrs;
I inhaled the violet's breath;
Around me stood the oaks and firs;
Pine-cones and acorns lay on the ground;
Over me soared the eternal sky,
Full of light and of deity;
Again I saw, again I heard,
The rolling river, the morning bird;—
Beauty through my senses stole;
I yielded myself to the perfect whole.

Similar poems were written by Whitman (1892 version; as cited in Poetry Foundation) who pointed at the interconnectedness human existence with nature:

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me (Poetry Foundation: no page).

Hence, nature is often accepted and treated as good, and in many cases perfect, as poets enjoy various aspects of it. Truth is that nature is neither good nor bad since adjectives such as good or bad are human made. Thus, "it compels us to believe that nature is kind and good, when, in fact, it is morally neutral" (Estok 2009: 209). Interestingly, it is written elsewhere that animals' goodness is possible according to their nature and not by according to the measures of humans. Kenneth Grahame (as cited in Rudd 2009) is believed to have said:

Every animal, by instinct, lives according to his nature. Thereby he lives wisely, and betters the tradition of mankind. No animal is ever tempted to deny his nature. No animal knows how to tell a lie. Every animal is honest. Every animal is true- and it is, therefore, according to his nature, both beautiful and good (243-244).

Shelley's last lines of her novel *Frankenstein* give us the amalgamation of fear and nature as the sea and the waves, along with darkness, serve so as to help the evil hide in peace:

"But soon," he cried, with sad and solemn enthusiasm, "I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell." He sprung from the cabin-window, as he said this, upon the ice-raft which lay close to the vessel. He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance (Literature.org: no page).

The first sentences of *Wuthering Heights* shows Brontë's separation of nature and the world of humans, especially that of the misanthropists':

1801- I have just returned from a visit to my landlord- the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist's heaven... (Brontë 2000: 1)

A Passage to India further depicts the river Ganges in its opening paragraphs in a way to mention it along the rubbish the city produces:

Except for the Marabar Caves- and they are twenty miles off- the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely (Forster 2005: 5).

Many other British novels show examples to expressing fear of or disgust with nature as British and American authors have often treated nature as a source of fear, danger, and contempt (Hillard 2009: 692). As such, humans' change in their surroundings from better to worse is often found in literary texts such as George Orwell's *Coming Up For Air*. The novel "concentrates on the disastrous effects of the rapid urbanisation and industrial activity over the despoliation of the natural environment" (Bulut 2005: 237). Just like feminism takes misogyny and sexism as its core issues and the core of ecocriticism is now regarded as ecophobia, that is, the fear of a loss of agency and control to nature. This feeling of ours that can be summarized as our "fear within (our) nature" is constantly nurtured by media as we "do not have access to the experiences that shaped a naturalist like Cooper, and although natural history writing is gaining a wider audience, it's still miniscule, at least in comparison with the vast numbers who consume horror fiction, films, and TV shows" (Crosby 2014: 523).

Available literary theories have "conveniently eliminated any demonstrated ecological knowledge as a requirement for ecocriticism" as they promote "the fiction of ecosystems being only humanly imagined and constructed—and so promotes those systems' exploitation" (Robisch 2009: 704). Hence, a new understanding of nature in the literary canon and how it is taught or studied is required all the while humans continue to be set apart from nature in cities. Humans are now emptied of their vocabulary of nature as can be seen in Robisch's anecdote

One close friend who had lived all his life in major cities said, "When I read some passage that has 'lupine,' 'fireweed,' and 'columbine' in it, I read: flower, flower, flower" (704).

These days, as Heise (2008) articulates, the number of films and documentaries on climate change has increased dramatically. As exemplified by Arikan (2011: 45) such films that employ climate change as their primary theme include animation films such as *Ice Age* and budget films such as *Absolute Zero*, *Ice Twisters*, *Meltdown: Days of Destruction* and *Arctic Blast*. Perhaps for the first time in human history a literary theory is interested in how our future will be shaped in the most subtle and wholistic way. This wholistic study does not study literary texts through limited categories such as social class or gender, but in a way to consider all aspects of life that surround all human beings. (Arikan 2011: 50). The first step in such an endeavor should be starting with the regional and cultural texts as expressed by Özdağ (2009), when the case of the Turkish academic is considered, we should study "the literary output of the centuries long Central Asian ancestors of the present day Turks, the Anatolian and Central Asian Turks' shamanistic past, the Orhon inscriptions [the oldest written documents of the Turkish language], the myths of the Oguz Turks, Anatolian Sufism, and Anatolian people's literary heritage, past and present, embedded in our Toprak Ana [Mother Earth] to bring out the ecological impulse at the root of them all and to bring back engagement with our lands" (141). The same applies to the Georgian academic who should carefully examine his or her people's ancient literary texts from their earliest examples to the most contemporary ones so as to discover the place of nature in these literary as well as cultural texts. A review of Georgian literature shows the richness of aspects of nature as expressed in it as can be exemplified in Akhvlediani's (no date) short story titled *Mosquito*:

What are insects? They are the weirdest thoughts of the nature, evoking so many ideas and feelings in me! Thinking how minuscule they are, I feel a deep sadness and sorrow. There are times when I get the impression that they are other forms of our lives, trapped in tiny bodies. And we are like them – helpless and defenseless, disgusting, abandoned and uncared for, bothersome, and unwanted. Maybe they embody our real lives (and existence) even better. Who knows?

Hence, people who read, write or critique literary texts can “imagine more sustainable ways of interacting with and dwelling on the earth” (Borlik 2011: 54) but this imagination is only one segment of the whole mechanism of problems we face in the world. Ecologies and environments worldwide are threatened, and the human and nonhuman catastrophes could be unprecedented (Mackenzie and Posthumus 2013: 770). Thus, an in-depth understanding of what ecophobia necessitates going one step forward towards doing “something” about our condition on the earth amidst natural “crises” we experience since, in reality, we as human beings, are the real crises of what we call nature. In that gloomy adventure, facing our fears is of utmost importance.

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