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Short Communication

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An Ecocritical Study of S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

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Abstract

Ecocritical study seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial and neo-colonial forces. Since the ages these threats remained in the focus of literature because it is the literature which teaches the man how to live on earth. It also develops a bond between the man and the nature. The man and the nature both survive together and if this bond is broken by the man it becomes punishable, the nature punishes the man time to time for criminal acts. The ecocritical study of the poem "The Rime of Ancient Mariner" presents such a bond between man and the nature. In the poem this bond is broken by the ancient mariner by killing the huge bird Albatross which used to visit his ship regularly on his voyage. The killing of the bird without no reason invites the natural disaster to men on voyage. The poem published in 1798 in the first edition of 'Lyrical Balad' but the study of it becomes more pertinent now a days when entire humanity is suffering from the world-wide pandemic Covid-19. The purpose of this paper is to attract the attention of the readers world-wide to maintain the bond between the man and the nature because the man has violated that bond which was made not to broken at any cost but the violation of that bond is inviting the natural disasters in different forms which are becoming dangerous to the existence of the man on earth.

Keywords: Ecocritical, Earth day, Sparrow day, Red list, Climate refugee, Ebola, Covid-19 Natural disaster, Albatross, Mariner pandemic, Global warming, Himalayan glaciers, Antarctica.

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1. Introduction

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. (<http://en.m.wikipedia.org>wiki>)

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When William Wordsworth was writing these lines then he was criticizing the industrial revolution for being absorbed in materialism and distancing itself from nature. It reflects his view that humanity must get in touch with nature for peaceful existence on earth. He is against the violation of the relationship between man and the nature. His universal appeal is more pertinent today because the man now a days is exploiting and violating the nature for materialistic pleasures, this exploitation and violation is inviting more and more natural disasters on earth in different forms like global warming, the demise of mountain glaciers, landslides, earthquakes, dam collapse, cloud burst, draught pandemic influenza, flood, hail, Tsunami and cyclone are much alarming to the entire humanity.

This time the theme of "Earth Day" is focused on the renovation of our earth and reducing the impact on the environment of every person. The question before us today is whose earth is this? In fact, it is of all human being as well as all the animals and birds. But unfortunately unbridled activities of human beings are affecting the lives of all other species on earth. At present the speed of extinction of various species is 10,000 times higher than normal. In last 25 years 8462 species have become extinct including animals and birds. Now the world 'Sparrow Day' has come about, besides 4415 species are in the Red List of the International Conservation of Nature. It is estimated that by 2050, 1.5 crore people will be 'Climate Refugee'. It is also believed that fish will not survive until 2050. More than 12000 seasonal disasters have occurred in last 20 years. Due to deforestation the animals are deprived of their natural residence, due to which such germs are coming in contact with humans which are causing dangerous diseases like Ebola and Covid-19 (originated from the coronavirus). (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2021)

2. The Relationship Between Man and the Environment

The re-establishment of the bond between man and the nature is the need of the hour and here is an sincere attempt to highlight this need by a beautiful example of Coleridge's poem "The Rime of Ancient Mariner" so that we can avoid the natural curse. In the recent years we have seen Kedarnath (Uttarakhand) tragedy (2013), Chamoli (Uttarakhand) flood in February 7, 2021, Australian Bush Fire (2019), Devastating Floods in Indonesia (2020), earthquake in Turkey (2020), Hurricane in USA (2020), Locust Swarm in East Africa and parts of India (2020) etc.

Literature always guide man for the beautiful survival on earth. When S.T. Coleridge wrote this poem in 1797 then he appealed to the entire world to save the nature, he denies to violate the relationship between man and the nature otherwise nature will retaliate. The example of ancient Mariner is with us. And we will see what kind of disaster he had to face on sea with his fellow Mariners. We will study why the ancient mariner, the only one is to survive among the crew? As a punishment for killing the Albatross, he is condemned to live, to tell the tale of sufferings. The poem deals with the theme of sin, punishment and penance. The poet shows how the disrespectful attitude of man results in his own destruction. The poem is a symbol of the representation of crime committed by man against nature and the retaliation of nature on man. This poem is in the form of a ballad and Ancient Mariner is the narrator of the poem who describes his own mysterious adventures on sea. He discloses his mystery to one of the wedding guests. When during the voyage the ship of Ancient Mariner is stuck in the ice and the crew is afraid of the death to come at any moment, in the mean while the huge bird Albatross miraculously appears behind the fog and the mist as a symbol of good luck. The entire crew is happy to see that bird, because they believe that the bird will work as the magic in the phase of crisis and will save their lives. That's why Albatross is welcomed with warm hospitality. For the entire team of the ship it has some supernatural powers. Thus, Albatross establishes a bond between the man and the nature between the natural world and the spiritual world. The poem falls into seven sections and each section tells a tale of new stage in the process.

The first section tells of the actual crime. To us the shooting of the bird may seem a matter of little moment, but Coleridge makes it significant in two ways. First he does not tell why the Mariner kills the Albatross. Secondly, this killing is the crime against the sanctified relation of guest and the host. The bird, which has been hailed in God's name "as if it had been a Christian soul" and is entirely friendly and helpful, is wantonly and recklessly killed. There is no need to urge that Coleridge was at the time obsessed by Neo-platonic ideals of the brother-hood of all loving things. Perhaps he was, but it does not matter. What matters is that the Mariner breaks a sacred law of life. In his action we see the essential frivolity of many crimes against humanity and the ordered system of the world and we must accept the killing of the Albatross as symbolical of them. Let us see the poem.

*The Wedding Guest Sat on a stone;
He can not choose but hear;
And thus spake that ancient man,
The bright eyed Mariner. (Varshney et al., 2020)*

The ship passing the harbor and the church came to the icy world where there was the presence the fog and the mist.

*And now there came both mist and snow
And it grew wondrous cold;
No shapes of men nor beasts we ken
The ice was all between,
The ice was here, the ice was there
The ice was all around.*

When the ship was in the fog and mist in the iceland then there comes the huge bird Albatross to help the mariners. As the following lines illustrate-

*It cracked and growled and roared and howled,
Like noises in swound!
At length did cross an Albatross,
Through the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.
It ate the food it never had eat,
And round and round it flew
The ice did split, with a thunder-fit;
The helmsman steered us through
And a good south wind sprung up behind;
The Albatross did follow,
And everyday for food or play,
Came to the Mariner's hollo!
In mist of cloud, on mast or shroud
It perched for vespers nine
While all the night, through fog-smoke white
Glimmered the white moon shine.*

.....
I shot the Albatross.

In the second section, the Mariner begins to suffer from punishment for what he has done, and the poet transfers to the physical world, the corruption and the helplessness which are the common attributes of guilt. The world which the Mariner faces after his crime is dead and loathsome. The ship has ceased to move and the sailors are tortured by thirst, while the only moving things in the hideous scene are the slimy creatures on the sea and the death fires which dance at night. The immediate results of crime are portrayed in the image of a universe dying of thirst and haunted by menacing phantoms.

*Day after day, day after day
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Up on a painted ocean.
Water water every where
And all the boards did shrink
Water water everywhere*

Nor any drop to drink.
The very deep did rot; 'O' Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.
About about, in reel and rout
The death fire dances at night;
The water like, a witch's oils
Burnt green, and blue and white.
And some in dreams assured were
Of the spirit that plagued up so.
And every tongue, through utter drought
Was withered at the root;
We could not speak, no more than if
We had been chocked with soot

The third section of the poem shows how the guilty soul becomes conscious of what it has done and of its isolation in the world. The Mariner first begins to realize the consequences of his action for himself when he sees the phantom ship which decides his doom.

The Night-mare Life in Death was she
Who thicks Man's blood with cold.

The night in which the Mariner's companions die symbolizes the darkness in the soul when it suddenly finds itself alone and robbed of familiar ties. Look at the scene of torture and punishment.

One after one
Too quick for groan or sigh
each turned his face with a ghastly pang,
And curshed me with his eye.
Four times fifty living men
(And I heard nor sigh nor groan)
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump
They dropped down one by one
The soul did from their bodies fly-
They fled to bliss of woe!
And every soul, it passed me by,
Like the whizz of my cross-bow!

In the fourth section, this sense of solitude is elaborated. The guilty soul is out of not merely human intercourse but from the consoling friendship of nature which mocks it with majestic detachment. Then a turn comes for the better. When the Mariner, albeit unaware, blesses the water snakes, he begins to re-establish relation with the world of the affection. This is not much and it is by no means the end, but it opens the way to the future. Instead of being dead, the spirit shows some small signs of that love which holds life together.

Beyond the shadow of the ship,
I watched the water-snakes;
They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light

Fell off in hoary flakes.

*Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire;
Blue, glossy, green and velvet black
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flesh of golden fire.
O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware.
The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.*

The fifth section of the poem continues the process of the soul revival. The ship begins to move, celestial spirits stand by the bodies of the dead men. The Mariner hears the heavenly music in the nature and is comforted by it. Before he can be fully healed he must establish relations not merely with God, and this faintly and feebly, he begins to do. When the music flows into his soul and delights him, he is on the way to recovery. But much awaits him. He has still his penance to do, but he is ready for it.

*Oh sleep, it is a gentle thing,
Beloved from pole to pole!
To Mary Queen the praise be given!
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven
That slid into my soul.
How long in the same fit I lay
I have not to declare;
But ere my living life returned
I heard and in my soul discerned
Two voices in the air.
Is it he? quoth, one, Is this the man?
By him who died on cross,
With his cruel bow he laid full low
The harmless Albatross.
The spirit who bideth by himself
In the land of mist and snow,
He loved the bird that loved the man
Who shot him with his bow.
The other was a softer voice,
As soft as honey-dew
Quoth, he The Man hath penance done,
And penance more will do.*

In the sixth section, the process of healing seems to be impeded. The Mariner is haunted by the presence of dead comrade and feels that he is pursued by some fearful power of vengeance.

*Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dead.
And having once turned round walk on
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.*

In the figure of the Mariner, haunted by the memories and fears the poet gives his special symbol of remorse. But because remorse brings repentance and humility. The section close with the vision of angelic forms standing by the dead sailors. The forgiveness of nature or God awaits even the most hard-hearted sinner if they will only be ready to receive it.

In the last section, the end, such as it is, comes. The guilty man has been shriven and restored to a place among living man. Most of the visible traces of his crime have been obliterated but the punishment of "Life-in-Death" is still at work. Since he has committed hideous act, the Mariner will never be the man that he once was. He has the special past and his special doom. At the time the memory of what he has done is so insistent that he must speak of it.

*Since than, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns;
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns.*

The need for the confession is to be found in most criminals, and the Mariner's need to speak is specially appropriate, because by forcing others to listen to him, he regains some of that human converse of which his crime has robbed him. Coleridge does not tell the end of the story but leaves us to suppose that the Mariner's sense of guilt will end only with his death. Such is the punishment of the violation of the bond between man and the nature.

The purpose of this illustration is to show the relation of nature with man, who is playing with nature with cruelty. The objective of ecocriticism include emphasizing the importance of environmental problems, raising people's awareness and giving place to other creatures on earth. A famous ecologist Aldo Leopold says that nature is not merely an object but it is a complete community and man must love and respect it. He advises man that he should not consider himself as the victor against the mercy of nature.

Land ethics translates the conqueror role of Homo Sapiens' land community into its plain member and citizen. It implies respect for fellow members and also respect for that community. In this respect, one should wave the role of conqueror who tries to dominate the land and accept to be simple citizen of his. (Leopold, 1949)

When this poem came into existence it was explained by so many scholars to express the social environment of man but the appearance of the term ecocriticism change the direction and the purpose of the poem. Now a days the study of this poem has become more pertinent because it presents the different angle of study. As Mishra has said that environment is used in different way covering the ecosystem.

Nature does not mean a mere fancy of its beautiful aspects like plants and animals. Nature here means the whole of the physical environment consisting of the human and the non-human. The interconnection between the two creates a bond which is the basis of ecocriticism. As long as there is a harmony between the living and the non-living, there prevails a healthy ecosystem for the benevolence of mankind as well as the earth. (Mishra, 2016)

Ecocriticism never makes the difference between human beings and disciplines. As Cheryll Glotfelty says in the following words:

In addition to race, class and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world. What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to

literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse. (Glotfelty, 1996)

3. Conclusion

We are living in the age of different types of natural disaster because we are exploiting nature for our greed forgetting the curse of nature as retaliation. The message of the poet S.T. Coleridge is quite clear that everyone who violates the bond between the nature and the man is criminal and he/she will be punished just like the ancient Mariner. As we have seen in the poem that crime was committed by the ancient Mariner but all the crew members of the ship were punished. The meaning to say is that he who commits the crime will be punished with all his community and here everyone is badly influenced by natural disaster. Nature not only punishes the criminals but it also forgives them if they have the feelings of regretness and promise themselves to bring the change in their nature. And if, they follow the principle of 'live and let live' they can bring the change into the environment and can save the earth for the coming generations. I think that we are the last generation which can save the earth otherwise a large number of natural calamities are waiting for our destruction by flues, flood, earthquakes, cyclone, draught and etc. As Dr. Turan Ozgur Gungor, Asst. Prof. Kafkas University in his paper entitles Vengeance of Nonhuman Beings: An Ecocritical Reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's work "The Rime of Ancient Mariners" says:

Coleridge warns the readers that selfishness and disrespectful attitude of humans to natural entities will result in permanent disasters. He advises not to murder the nonhuman beings. He advises to love, give respect and learn to live in harmony with other nonhumans in this world. This is a must not only for the sake of nonhumans but also for human beings. (Gungor, 2020, p. 370)

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