



HOW SUSTAINABILITY WAS JEOPARDIZED BY RELIGION, REASON, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Arvind Barde^{1*} and Dr. Mohammad Aslam Sheikh²

¹Associate Professor in English,

Anand Niketan College, Anandwn-Warora, Tah. Warora Dist. Cahandrapur, Maharashtra, India.

²Professor in English,

Nevjabai Hitkarini College, Bramhapuri, Tah. Bramhapuri Dist. Chandrapur, Maharashtra, India.

*Corresponding Author: arvind.barde1@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT:

In the West, Christianity's story of Creation, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions, not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends. In ancient paganism, every tree, every stream, every hill, in fact, every natural object had its own guardian spirit. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. In the Middle Ages the notion of 'Great Chain of Being' viewed the whole creation as a chain or ladder of the life forms with humans above the beasts and a little below the angels. But, when this idea was inherited by Renaissance and Enlightenment, it was given a new configuration by 'humanism'. Humanism, basically an advocate of classical learning, gave importance to reason, intellect and progress and argued that only humans had a rational discourse as opposed to animals. Later, during the progress of science and technology, the Baconian principle that "scientific knowledge means technological power over nature" further strengthened this anthropocentric attitude. Ecocriticism, by using the insights provided by 'deep ecology' and critical theory, questions the validity of these 'homocentric' traditions of thought and advocates 'biocentrism'.

Key words: - Christianity, Anthropocentrism, Paganism, Enlightenment, Humanism, Empiricism, Ecocriticism, Biocentrism.

INTRODUCTION:

In his famous 1967 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", the English critic and thinker Lynn White Jr. observes that, in the West, Christianity, the religion itself, was responsible for the development of anthropocentric view towards nature. Later, technology and science only followed the tradition of thought that was already established by the religion. According to him, "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 9) – that is, 'nature'. And how does Christianity image 'man' in relation to nature? This can be found in the striking story of Creation. The story of Creation goes like this – "By gradual stages, a loving and all powerful god had created light and

darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its planets, animals, birds and fishes. Finally, god had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule, no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purpose. And although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in god's image" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 9). In this way, "Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism) not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 10).

In order to show how this religious directionality got percolated in the popular practice, Lynn White Jr. cites an example of Western illustrated calendars in the 19th century. In older calendars, the months were shown as passive personifications, the new Frankish calendars of the nineteenth century showed men coercing the world around them – plowing, harvesting, chopping trees, butchering pigs. These human actions were in accordance with the larger intellectual patterns. In ancient paganism every tree, every stream, every hill, in fact, every natural object had its own guardian spirit. “By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 10). Every human action in relation to the non-human nature seemed to announce the axiom that ‘man is the master of all things around him’. Later, during the progress of science and technology, the Baconian principle that “scientific knowledge means technological power over nature” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 4), further strengthened this anthropocentric attitude.

In this connection, Christopher Manes, in his essay ‘Nature and Silence’, argues that the ‘construction’ of nature as a ‘silent’ subject by the idiom of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism is an important aspect in the development of an anthropocentric attitude towards nature. According to him, the language of humanism, full of ‘its own cultural obsessions, directionalities and motifs’, has helped to compress the entire ‘buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology’, rendering the voices of nature dumb. As a result, nature has become “silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 15).

In contrast, as the anthropological studies show, the animistic cultures see natural world as inspirited. In the animistic cultures, “not just people, but also animals, plants, and even “inert” entities such as stones and rivers are perceived as being articulate and at times intelligible subjects, able to communicate and interact with humans for good or ill” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 15).

For Manes, in view of the present environmental-ecological crisis, the awareness of this distinction is important in the effort of the proposition of a viable environmental ethics, because, to regard nature as alive and articulate or otherwise has important consequences on our knowledge of, and our social practices towards nature. For example, the humanistic construction of nature as a ‘silent’ subject automatically keeps it out of the realm of moral considerations, as “moral considerations seem to fall only within the circle of speakers in communication with one another” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 16). Manes quotes Hans Peter Duerr who once remarked that “people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 16), and, goes on to say that people exploit nature that does not speak to them.

As a consequence, according to Manes, without confronting the process and the genealogy of nature’s silence, that is so ingrained in our contemporary regime of thought, it is not possible to propose any viable environmental ethics, “for it is within this vast, eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity that the ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished, producing the ecological crisis that now requires the search for an environmental counterethics” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 16).

Manes says that nature has been silenced in the breakdown of animism first by the introduction of alphabetic writing when the

meaning shifted from the natural objects to the written word, then by Christian exegesis – Christianity’s particular form of interpreting biblical texts – which told that the description of things in the passages of Bible indicated towards some moral meaning behind which lay some divine purpose. This practice of interpretation was then extended to other texts and finally to the nonhuman world itself. “Like the leaven or mustard seeds in the Christ’s parables the things in nature could thus be seen as mere littera – signs that served as an occasion for discovering deeper realms of meaning underlying the forms of the physical world” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 19). In the Middle Ages the notion of *scala naturae* or ‘Great Chain of Being’ viewed the whole creation as a chain or ladder of the life forms with humans above the beasts and a little below the angels. It was seen as a perfect order created by god and hence it also exercised some restraint on the abuse of the nonhuman. But, when this idea was inherited by Renaissance and Enlightenment, it was given a new configuration by a school of thought which would later be called as humanism. Humanism, basically an advocate of classical learning, gave importance to reason, intellect and progress. Taking advantage of the place allotted to humans in the ‘Great Chain of Being’ it came to emphasize the ontological ‘difference’ between ‘dumb beasts’ and *Homo sapiens* by arguing that only humans had a rational discourse as opposed to animals.

According to the American ecocritic Lawrence Buell, anthropocentrism is so universal that it transcends the borders of cultures, ethnicity and gender. All living writers and readers are somehow constrained by the human-centered vision created by the society and science, in such a way that nature as a silent and oppressed class is desperately in need of a spokesperson. This is probably because, as Niel Evernden, in his essay ‘Beyond Ecology’ says, our entire justification for the existence of the

non human world is based on ‘utility’. This is a serious flaw in our cultural assumptions which makes the advocacy of biocentric human existence impossible. Anthropocentrism is even more stressed through the blind practice of literary theory’s basic assumptions. According to Buell, contemporary literary theory’s premise of the disjunction between the text and the world is certainly a necessary starting point for a mature understanding of literature’s capacity of representation, but it is also a move that tends to efface the world. “Wonderfully astute in some ways, in others this criticism is myopic” (Buell, 1995, p. 5) in that, to deny the physical existence of anything other than ‘man’ and ‘culture’ seems to be the result of the disciplinary imperatives that it has to follow, but it does not point towards the actual situation.

A modern transfiguration of anthropocentrism that made ecocentric thinking seemingly redundant is discussed by Harold Fromm in his essay ‘From Transcendence to Obsolescence’. “In the early days, man had no power over Nature and turned, instead to his mind and its gods for consolation. Meanwhile, his mind produces a technology that enables his body to be as strong as the gods, rendering the gods superfluous and putting nature in a cage. Then it appears that there is no Nature and that man has produced virtually everything out of his own ingenuity and it can be bought in a supermarket or a discount store...” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 35). Gradually, in the wake of industrialization, the technological mediation in the human life became so pervasive that nature became nearly non-existent or obsolete in the life of an average western individual. Every natural thing needed for the satisfaction of the physical needs of man was made available in the supermarket neatly wrapped up in plastic bags which made the relation between those things and their origin obscure. It helped to develop the view that technology and not nature is responsible for human existence.

By using the premises of ecology and those of postmodern critical theory, ecocriticism questions the validity of homocentrism and underlines the need for biocentric ways of human relations with nature. “Both theorists and ecologists are at core revolutionary. They stand in opposition to traditional authority, which they question and then reject. All of them begin by criticizing the dominant structures of Western culture and the vast abuses they have spawned” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 127). By taking values from the once dominant and giving it to the weak, theory and ecology transform the traditional concepts on which the old hierarchies like nature/ culture, human/ non-human, civilized/ primitive are built. Instead of the traditional humanist concept of ‘man’ as an authoritative, separate ‘center’ of value or meaning, they advance the notion of ‘networks’. One of the premises of critical theory is that the character of an individual is shaped by all kinds of influences outside himself, that “we are part of vast networks, texts written by larger and stronger forces” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 134). As the deep ecologist Arne Naess says, quoted in ‘The Land and Language of Desire’, “Organisms are knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 132), and therefore, to consider human beings as the center of everything becomes untenable. “Why should man”, asked John Muir, “value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation?” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 128). Ecocriticism uses this premise of ‘networks’, simultaneously advanced by critical theory and ecology, to counter the homocentric argument for the suppression and the unlimited exploitation of the non-human, which now seems to have reached to its limits.

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