

REPUTED BUT BLEMISHED *MOTHER* IN GARY SNYDER: AN ECO-CRITICAL READING

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It is in the current scenario of ecological disasters, eco criticism, the theoretical as well as the practical phases including green literature, ecological philosophy, eco spirituality, deep ecology, environmentalism, ecological studies, animal studies etc. becomes extremely creditable and appropriate. All these diverse features accentuate safeguarding the environment retaining it greener and healthier. Ecocriticism, an environment-oriented study of literature leads to eco consciousness and 'ecological conversion.' Postmodern period with its scientific progress and technological advancements is not adept enough to combat ecological predicament, the global phenomenon. Eco literature and ecologically oriented studies invite human beings to a better perception of nature in its wider significance.

The term *ecocriticism* was first coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay: "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco criticism." Ernst Heinrich Haeckel (1834-1919), a German biologist and philosopher used for the first time the term *ecology* in 1876. The word '*eco*' has its origin from Greek '*oikos*' which means '*household*' or '*earth*' and '*logy*' from '*logos*' with the meaning '*logical discourse*.' Thus the term '*ecology*' gets the meaning '*logical study of the earth*.' In his ground breaking essay, Rueckert postulates what this idea of eco-criticism might look like:

Specifically, I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world, we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years ... I could say that I am going to try to discover something about the ecology of literature, or try to develop an ecological poetics by applying ecological concepts to the reading, teaching, and writing about literature (*The Ecocriticism Reader* 107).

Ecocriticism was officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works in the 1990's, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell and *The Eco criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) by Cherryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Buell explores the American pastoral experience and pays greater attention to the emergent threat of ecological holocaust. He evaluates that environmental orientations encourage pastoralism as a literary and cultural force. Ecocriticism for Buell is, 'a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist's praxis' (*The Environmental Imagination*, 430). Glotfelty, the reputed founder of ecocriticism in the United States remarks:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xviii).

Glen A. Love, a pioneer in ecocriticism, in his *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (2003) focus on ecocriticism as a heterogeneous approach:

What is emerging is a multiplicity of approaches and subjects, including- under the big tent of environmental literature- nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, the revaluation of place, interdisciplinarity, eco-theory, the expansion of the canon to include previously unheard voices, and the interpretation of canonical works from the past (5).

Glen tries to bring communication between the natural sciences and the humanities in the third millennium, 'the century of the environment.' He attempts to establish "a coherent and broadly based movement embracing literary environmental interconnections" (3).

Greg Garrad in *Ecocriticism*, measures the political praxis associated with ecocriticism, by the extent to which one uses, saves, or ignores the environment. In Garrad's scheme, most ecocritics would probably identify themselves as "environmentalists" or "deep ecologists." Garrad also categorizes the literary loci of the environment: pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and the Earth (Johnson 8). Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2002) claims that ecocriticism has no universal model. He gives a list of what ecocritics do: reading literature from an ecocritical point of view, applying ecological issues to the presentation of the natural world, showing appreciation for ethical positions towards nonhuman nature, etc.

Gary Snyder, the unchallenged environmental activist and ecopoet of the current American scenario, was born in San Francisco in 1930 to Harold and Lois Snyder. The post-depression days of anguish, dilemma and poverty little Snyder had to work hard for his daily bread. Assisting parents in farming, young Snyder kept "close contact with the fabric of nature." After the separation of his parents, Snyder had to move to Portland but did not give up his affection for the natural world, studying the life of Native American mythology and tradition. This influenced his views of how it was possible to exist in the world, resulting in a lifelong fascination with their beliefs and rituals.

Life in Japan for ten years from 1956 onwards, was quite fascinating for Snyder with the teachings and practices of Zen Buddhism. The Buddhist notion of *interpenetration* is a key component in Snyder poems which is directly connected with the way animals, plants and other biotic organisms represented. According to Snyder effects of capitalism can be disabled by re-establishing an appropriate relationship with the environment, and for the same, the easiest path is that of Buddhism. "The Buddhists teach respect for all life, and for wild systems. Man's life is totally dependent on an interpenetrating network of wild systems" (*Turtle Island* 104) In the poem "Mother Earth: Her Whales," the 'sun' rays have an effect on the diet of people. Snyder's poetry evidently articulates the fundamental eco critical principles of "celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (Howarth 163), the *political action* in Snyder is his poetry. He has participated in conservation projects and local politics in his native California. A Snyder speech at the Colorado State College known as *Earth Day Speech* in which he admitted: "the moment I stepped foot on this soil after having been away that long, I immediately got into the ecological battle- the only battle that counts now, the only thing that matters to me anymore" (Murphy, *Understanding Gary Snyder* 14)

Turtle Island (1974), the masterpiece of Gary Snyder not only deals with nature like in his former books, but also took the liberty to denounce serious ecological deficits of the

time- Japanese whaling, littering, and indiscriminate use of nuclear power and mankind's apathy concerning nature and ecology in general. According to Patrick D. Murphy, "*Turtle Island* is one of the bestselling collections of serious poetry in the United States." (*Understanding Gary Snyder* 109)

Turtle Island was written after Snyder's return to America from a twelve year sojourn in Japan. The Pulitzer Prize winning poetry collection has 58 poems in four sections and the prose section, "Four Changes" which is the Snyder strategy on eco poetry, bioregionalism, ecology and anthropocentrism. This "plain talk" outlines the kind of initiatives Snyder believed the country needed in order to maintain ecological diversity and make salutary changes as a culture.

Snyder's ecological perception is obviously seen in his attitude towards 'Earth.' He ascribes feminine and maternal characteristics to the planet, accentuating its life giving function and implies a kind of family relationship between the earth and the beings living on it. The planet's providing for its dwellers can be seen as an act of maternal love, as it furnishes them with all necessary goods, such as food, water, air and territory and subsequently offers them an opportunity to develop. In response, the earth deserves the respect of her children and a careful use of its resources, not only in order to keep its support, but also as a token of gratitude. The extinction of any living being, no matter plant or animal, inevitably weakens the earth's natural stability and leads to deadly consequences on the environment.

For Snyder, the poet and environmentalist, the Universe is a family where all are united and interdependent. "I am a child of all life, and all living beings are my brothers and sisters, my children and grandchildren," declares Snyder in "Four Changes." (*Turtle Island* 93) This deep faith and extraordinary vision is envisaged in his "Prayer for the Great Family" where he solemnly prays for the wellbeing of everything. It is noteworthy that *gratitude* is the prayer that he offers:

Gratitude to Mother Earth, sailing through night and day-
and to her soil: rich, rare, and sweet
in our minds so be it. (1-3)

In the poem "The Great Mother," Snyder bestows the enormous mother figure. The mother is seated on her chair, which can be reckoned as a throne of sovereignty. She permits her progenies utmost freedom since they are blessed with the power of reason, logical thinking and the skill of discerning good and bad. "What sort of savages"- is satirical and ironic a statement hidden in the thought-provoking query! Snyder coerces his readers to ruminate upon the discourteous and egotistic attitude of humanity towards the ecosystem and. Man has to answer to all his misbehaviour while the nature and the ecosystem takes retaliation upon him through the climate change, pollution, energy depletion and sources scarcity. No one can escape her *ogle*:

Not all those who pass
In front of the Great Mother's chair
Get passt [sic] with only a stare.
Some she looks at their hands

To see what sort of savages they were. (1-5)

This dignitary mother figure invokes in the readers a scene of judgement. According to the Christian belief, "everyone has to come in front of the Judgement Throne" and they will be punished or rewarded according to the good or bad each one has done during the lifetime on earth. This 'Great Mother' and her stare is somewhat judgemental. Human attitude towards each other as well as that with the ecosystem will be judged. This maternal stature is akin to the *Gaia* hypothesis where 'Gaia' embodies 'land or mother.' According to James Lovelock (1919-), the champion of *Gaia Theory*, biosphere is a single organism. Organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a self-regulating, complex system that contributes to maintaining the conditions for life on the planet. Gaia is considered, "a complex entity involving the earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system, which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet" (Lovelock 11)

Snyder's Mother Earth was vibrant with the variety of species both animal and plant. Mother's radiant figure and her magnanimity are spoiled now just because of the 'mad pursuit' of her children. Snyder fashioned a pioneering benchmark of awareness and responsibility. "As a poet, I hold the most archaic values on earth. They go back to the late Palaeolithic: the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals...the common work of the tribe. I try to hold both history and wildness in mind, that my poems may approach the true measure of things and stand against the unbalance and ignorance of our times," says Snyder. Species extinction, wilderness, dwelling, apocalypse, pollution, energy transformation, natural beauty, primitive culture- all these correlated areas of ecocritical approach are highlighted with due prominence in Snyder and that adds colour, vigour and relevance to his poetry.

Gary Snyder is important as a writer about environmental issues, and is a prototype for modern environmental activism. He strives with his writing to redefine the ways in which nature is popularly perceived and he is combating the generations of negative thought and action directed toward the environment. Snyder spends his days creatively in reading, writing, sharing his views through interviews and intellectual talks even at the age of eighty six. His life in the Japanese style house at Kitkitdizze in the foothills of Sierra Nevada in San Francisco appropriately symbolizes the poet's commitment to life in the American wilderness. It might have taken years to get acquainted with the geography, geology, flora, fauna, and the history of the area of the Northern California. In the "Plain Talk" in his *Turtle Island*, provides a sketch of the region:

Crackly grass and Blue oak, the special smells of pungent sticky flowers, give way, climbing, through Digger pine and into Black oak and Ponderosa pine; sweet birch, manzanita, kitkitdizze. This is our home country. We dig wells and wonder where the water table comes from. We wonder where the deer go in the summer heat, and where they come from in the fall (*Turtle Island* 111).

He pays the property tax, but claims no more right to the land than the other creatures that live on it. While going through a good number of his poems, we get the feeling that he is completely against human progress and technological development; Never. He himself advises: "a scaled-down, balanced technology is possible, if cut loose from the cancer of exploitation-heavy-industry-perpetual growth." 'To grow with less' is the counterculture that Snyder advocates as the panacea for the diseases and consequences of the present era.

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