

**‘AND EARTH, SEA, MAN, ARE ALL IN EACH’:
AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI’S
SELECTED POEMS**

Md. Zohorul Islam
English Department, Green University of Bangladesh
e-mail: zohorul@eng.green.edu.bd

Abstract

Ecocriticism or Green Study emerged in the field of literature in the late 20th century where the relationship between literary text and physical environment is explored. The recent human actions and environmental degradation have encouraged human beings to explore the ecological visions of the authors from different genres. The industrial revolution in the Victorian era brought enormous changes in society, and literary texts were produced concerning ecological degradation or celebrating the relationship between human beings and nature. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's vision toward establishing the connection between humans and the physical environment is an important aspect of the ecocritical study. Ecocriticism has been widely viewed as a field of study where environmental awareness can be raised through the theoretical study of literary texts. Therefore, this paper aims at exploring Dante Gabriel Rossetti's selected poems from an ecocritical point of view. Rossetti's poems represent a significant amount of human-nature interaction and nature's enormous healing power to the eco-system. This study also aims at growing the ecological consciousness of the readers in a world where it is going through a phase of life-threatening climate change.

Keywords: Victorian poetry, Ecocriticism, nature, ecology

INTRODUCTION

Nature has been one of the key elements in the writing of authors from the earliest literary pieces to the contemporary ones. The perception of nature however has been different in different genres of literature (Culajara, 2016). The representation of nature in literary works is an important issue in the current context due to environmental degradation and climate change in the contemporary world (Buell, Heise, & Thornber, 2011). Despite being the provider to the human race, nature still faces cruelty in every sphere of the world (Borlik, 2012). Several authors have taken literature to celebrate nature to represent and glorify nature in their writings. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's works in the Victorian period when environmental degradation was taking place due to the industrial revolution, are the true depiction of ecological consciousness from a poet.

The term 'ecocriticism' was first coined by William Ruekert in 1978 in his publication *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* and it is often perceived as a landmark for studying literature from an environmental perspective. Although environmental issues in literature and literary theories have been 'marginalized' for decades, since the 1980s, environmental concern started to surface among the literary critics (Buell, 2005). About the emerging need of environmental consciousness, (Buell, 2005) argues, "as the prospect of a sooner-or-later apocalypse by unintended environmental disaster came to seem likelier than apocalypse of deliberate nuclear machismo, public concern about the state and fate of "the environment" took

increasing hold, initially in the west but now worldwide". Critics started to take the environmental issues in literature as a serious project in the 1980s whereas the 'environmental literary study' grew in the 1990s (Glofelty & Fromm, 1996).

Although known for his significant contribution to Victorian painting, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) showed extraordinary talent in writing poetry. An elder brother of celebrated Victorian poet Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), Dante Gabriel Rossetti shared a close relationship with his sister and exchanged views on literary techniques in their household (Greenblatt, 2006). In Rossetti's poems, one of the concurring themes is the glorification of nature which promotes the deep understanding of the natural world and its impact on human beings.

Rossetti's works have been praised for the aesthetic values as well as his thorough evaluation of the human psyche and emotional struggles. Rossetti's poems, however, promoted nature in such a way where he did not see nature as a subordinate entity, rather he saw nature as an independent entity with tremendous influence on human psychology. His treatment of non-living entities as equal contributors in nature can be viewed from an eco-centric view. Therefore, the researcher is highly motivated to analyze the selected poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti from an ecocritical point of view to unearth the stunning narrative of his ecological consciousness.

METHOD

This research uses the ecocritical theory to analyze the ecological consciousness of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's selected poems. Ecocriticism helps us to connect literature with nature through a close reading of literary texts. The researcher analyzed the lines, symbols, metaphors, and other literary devices of Rossetti's poems available both in print and electronic forms. The researcher also went through studies on Rossetti's works to create analytical comparisons. This research is qualitative in nature where collected data is analyzed to unearth the deep-rooted meanings of Rossetti's poems.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The Victorian era produced literature covering a vast area of topics and works from that era grabbed the attention of a diverse group of literary critics (Bristow, 2000). The Victorian era was plagued with the industrial revolution and writers showed reactions to the degradation of nature through their works in the field of literature. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's views and philosophy toward nature and the impact of nature on human beings justifies his position as an important poet for ecocritical study. As a poet, Rossetti was influenced by classical poet Homer but his main inspiration came from the contemporaries like Keats, Poe, Coleridge, and Tennyson (Rossetti, 1887). Rossetti's consciousness about the natural world matches with his contemporaries. Rossetti's celebration of nature is a significant aspect to understand his ecological consciousness. The past experiences are important to enrich our knowledge [at present] about the natural hazard because "projecting this category onto people we find [in the past], especially when the past in question is ecologically continuous with our own" (Nersessian, 2013, cited in Williams, 2017). Rossetti's depiction of the non-humans in his poem "The Blessed Damozel" paints the picture of his consciousness about the existence of the non-humans as a separate and independent entity of nature. He says:

“The sun was gone now; the curled moon
Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf; and now
She spoke through the still weather.
Her voice was like the voice the stars
Had when they sang together. (Rossetti in Greenblatt, 2006)

In “The Blessed Damozel” the grieving woman is hoping to reunite with the lover and her voice sounds like the language stars speak when they sing. The reality will never put the lovers together because one of them is dead. However, Rossetti focuses on the concrete aspect of nature to relate to the lover's sorrows. Mahoney (2010) argues that “Rossetti focuses on the concrete images generated by a grieving love to bring his beloved back to life, a goal that cannot, of course, ever be realized”. However, Rossetti’s depiction of hyperbole promotes the sincere concentration on the non-human actors that are often ignored by the naked human eyes. The poet has given the stars and other non-human objects a voice. The consciousness of Rossetti about the significance of the non-human entities are momentous in ecocriticism. The sun, the moon, and the stars are represented carefully by Rossetti to give equal importance in comparison with the human beings in the discourse of the poem which is always sponsored in ecocriticism.

Often neglected, the non-human actors of the environment have as significant existence as human beings proclaim to have in society. Iovino & Oppermann (2014) emphasizes the recognition of the non-human entities of natural actors in ecocriticism saying, “like the simplest one-cell organisms, this expression of life that we call “literature” ultimately depends on the energy provided by the sun; like them, it is intrinsically at home in the biosphere”. Rossetti promotes the dialogue between humans and nature by representing the impact of non-humans on the emotions of the human race. The artistic imagination of Rossetti helped him to express complex feelings about the relationship between human beings and nature in his poems. Rossetti's notion of writing poetry differed from the romantics as they were often regarded as anthropocentric which puts human beings' position superior to the other non-human actors of nature. According to Barclay (1997),

“Rossetti’s movement away from a Romantic poetics of process that elevates the act of creation or composition into a structural principle of poetry, which he replaces with a new emphasis on the process of transmission and consumption, illustrates his affiliation with the consumerist ethos that beginning to replace the ethos of production dominant at the beginning of the century.”

The rejection of hierarchy in nature in terms of understanding the relationship between humans and non-humans in ecocriticism is viewed as a noteworthy part. The work of Rossetti shows that the existence of nature with the human race is equally acknowledged. The overwhelming presence of nature in Rossetti's "The Sea-Limits" creates a lasting impact on human beings and the essence of having a proper understanding of the surroundings. The aesthetic and scenic representation of the sea in the first stanza eventually starts to become a background of the poem through which the entire nature can be represented. Rossetti says:

Secret continuance sublime
 Is the sea's end; our sight may pass
 No furlong further. Since time was,
 This sound hath told the lapse of time. (Rossetti in Greenblatt, 2006)

Nature is constant and they have always been, but they are not consciously noticed by many in their lives. The irreparable harm that has been done to the environment would have stopped if we noticed the importance of the non-human entities in nature. "The Sea-Limits" shows the poet's acknowledgment of nature when he cleverly suggests that thousands of civilizations have been eliminated but the sea has always been there. Representation of the aesthetic value of the sea is significant to understand Rossetti's ecological consciousness. According to Uddin (2016), "Aesthetic value is part of nature's intrinsic value, *i. e.* the value, as deep ecologists claim, nature has in and of itself". Human being dies after a certain age but the sea has a constant presence since the start of time. The seas have been roaring from the start of evolution. The keen observation of the poet about nature drives the readers to find the meaning of the rhythmic sounds a sea makes with the waves. The echo of the sound is as real as the voice of a human being. The poet's idea of accrediting the sea a voice promotes the idea that the sea is not just a part of nature as to where it should be treated like a subordinate, rather the existence is real and meaningful. The poet continues by saying:

As the world's heart of rest and wrath,
 Its painful pulse is in the sands. (Rossetti in Greenblatt, 2006)

One of the objectives of ecocriticism says that it increases the awareness of human beings about ecological consciousness and the above-mentioned lines are the perfect example of how awareness can be promoted through the study. The ecological impact of the sea is always uncertain as it can be bliss to the human when nature is calm but can destroy everything with wrath. Rossetti's approach to bringing the value of nature for all the complex reasons is aligned with the ecocritical study because one of the characteristics of ecocriticism is to "ascribe value to nature for its beauty, complexity, or wildness" (Farooq & Chandra, 2012). The calm sea creates a soothing feeling in the readers' minds, and at the same time, the thought of a sea full of wrath evokes anxiety. There is no doubt that these are essentially true about the behavior of nature and sometimes it cannot be controlled, but human actions, to some extent, have their contribution to environmental degradation. The centuries-old capitalist greed has contributed a lot to producing machines that contaminated, polluted, and hurt water and other resources of nature. When ideologies are shaped by wealth and material gain, which are achieved at the expense of nature, the dynamic equilibrium of nature is destroyed, it results in slow but catastrophic wrath from nature.

Rossetti's "Silent Noon" shows the existence of nature in a sublime set of words. While describing a quiet, yet powerful portrayal of silent noon, the poet says: "Oh! Clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower, This close-companioned inarticulate hour/When twofold silence was the song of love" (Rossetti in Greenblatt, 2006). Thus, Rossetti feels, the simple representation of nature can be a source of great joy and a conscious outlook on nature can keep us going with our lives. The speaker and his beloved are in peace because nature has provided them a setting where everything is standing still. The motionless nature created a simple, yet elegant environment for two human beings who are in love. Also, the setting of "Silent Noon" promotes a strong sense of nature's powerful existence, and Rossetti's acknowledgment of nature in calm

and quiet noon promotes ecological consciousness. Rossetti's visualization in "Silent Noon" replicated the influence of nature on the feelings of human beings. Nature, to Rossetti, is a setting where earth, sea, men, and even time exist depending on each other. Nature has the power to control the emotion of human beings and mankind's activities are shaped by the surrounding nature. The soothing environment is taken as bliss by the speaker but the careful representation of nature and its influence on human beings are presented in a sophisticated way. This claim can be justified through the other lines of "Silent Noon" where the speaker states:

All round our nest, far as the eye can pass,
Are golden kingcup-fields with silver hedge
Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn hedge.
'Tis visible silence, still as the hourglass. (Rossetti in Greenblatt, 2006)

The speaker of 'Silent Noon' is in a secluded place but the awareness about the surrounding is presented in a way where everything seems alive. 'Visible silence', 'grass', 'sun', enhances the surroundings and even though the place is as quiet as an 'hourglass', Rossetti's representation gives the environment equal importance. Glocelty & Fromm (1996) argued, "the conviction that humans are neither better nor worse than other creatures ... but simply equal to everything else in the natural world". There is no sound from the machine (which was common in the Victorian era) and no disturbance from other forces. The life of these two humans in "Silent Noon" is not suffering from sound pollution or any other pollutions and nature is showing its gratitude by remaining quiet. The psychological and ideological implication of the poem is transmitted on the characters of the poem and in general to the mass readers who carefully see the intended meaning of the setting and discourse offered by Rossetti. So, within the framework of ecocriticism, Rossetti's poems are essentially pro-ecology that is conscious of the surrounding nature. The claim can be justified further by Rossetti's following lines:

The echo of the whole sea's speech.
And all mankind is thus at heart
Not anything but what thou art;
And Earth, Sea, Man, are all in each. (Rossetti in Greenblatt, 2006)

Rossetti, while highlighting the importance of understanding nature for our wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of the coming generations, shows how human beings and nature live in harmony and peace. The pastoral representation of Rossetti in his poems suggests that nature is the source of peace, order, and harmony. A mutual understanding between nature and human beings promotes all the aspects to remain in order and the environment can be saved from degradation. Rossetti's sensitive and intelligent representation of nature in his poems promotes the ecological consciousness of human beings. A deeper understanding of 'And Earth, Sea, Man, are all in each' can stop the human race from establishing a fragile relationship with nature. Nature's fundamental equilibrium is getting destroyed by human actions. The fundamental changes create an imbalance in the system and complexity occurs which are often catastrophic for the world. Ecological consciousness can reduce human acts that destroy the natural balance. A simple appreciation of nature, for example, a tree can have a positive impact on the environment.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

To conclude, Rossetti's view about the relationship between human beings and nature reflects a deep understanding of ecological consciousness. The 'ecocentric' approach of the poet projects a sense of sheer importance of nature in human beings' life. The pastoral harmony is also a key point to understand the importance of Rossetti's views on nature and the order of the world. The relationship between human and non-human actors in nature was given equal importance by the poet to show that peace and harmony can prevail in the world through a conscious understanding of nature. To fight the ecological degradation in the current world where human actions are dominating factors, Rossetti's poems can inspire us from restraining ourselves from the maltreatment of the environment. Rossetti's poetry should be viewed as an urge to human beings to start an 'ecocentric' approach towards nature and absorb the bliss of nature in every sphere of their life. In Rossetti's words:

“The wind flapped loose, the wind was still,
Shaken out dead from tree and hill;
I had walked on at the wind's will-
I sat now, for the wind was still.

Between my knees my forehead was-
My lips, drawn in, said not Alas!
My hair was over in the grass,
My naked ears heard the day pass”. (Rossetti in Greenblatt, 2006)

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