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Eco-consciousness in Andrew Marvell's *The Garden*

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Abstract

This paper explores ecological and environmental issues in Andrew Marvell's poem, "The Garden." The purpose of this paper is to subvert the anthropocentric world view by juxtaposing the eco-centric world which provides ultimate pleasure to human beings. This paper employs qualitative and interpretative method to analyze the poem. The researcher has examined the poem from the perspective of eco-criticism. Distancing himself from the anthropocentric world-view, Marvell highlights the eco-centric world in order to valorize the beauty and serenity of nature. Marvell glorifies nature and natural beauty by using metaphysical conceits. The poem displays superiority of nature over trivial human culture. In addition, it shows eternity of nature by contrasting it with the transitory nature of human world. The garden is a place for refreshment and nourishment; it stands for innocence, solitude and recreation. Mistaken by the temptation of the material world, the poet seeks peace and pleasure in the human company. However; he finds such blissful states in the lap of nature. Marvell's critique of anthropocentrism and glorification of biocentrism opens an avenue for the critiques who are interested in integrating literary texts with the Environmental Studies. Thus; the present reading of the poem unveils the eco-conscious elements of the poem from the lens of eco-criticism.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, anthropocentrism, green, garden and nature

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Introduction

Revisiting Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" in an age of environmental crises provides a profound insight about nature and its conservation. The poem is rich in terms of its imagery, symbolism and musical quality. However, beyond its lyrical beauty and philosophical theme, "The Garden" offers a fertile ground for eco critical analysis. Marvell depicts an idyllic picture of natural world contrasting it with the artifice and corruption of the human world. Through his celebration of the garden as a source of refreshment and nourishment, Marvell critiques the anthropocentrism which exploits nature and environment. In addition, he advocates for a harmonious relationship with the natural world. The green imagery of the garden and its implicit meaning inspires the readers for co-existence and symbiotic relationship with nature. Thus, this study excavates eco-conscious dimension of the poem, revealing how the poem articulates a vision of ecology and environment that is relevant to the contemporary discourse of Environmental Studies.

By examining "The Garden" through the perspective of eco-criticism, the present reading of the poem, aims to uncover the ecological concerns. Moreover, it explores early awareness of environmental issues in the works of Andrew Marvell. In doing so, this study not only interprets Marvell's works but also contributes to the boarder field of Environmental Studies. By critiquing the anthropocentric perspective and highlighting the symbiotic relationship between human and non-human world, Marvell's poetry anticipates ecological concerns. As the world faces an intense environmental crisis, reviewing Marvell's poetry offers an invaluable insight into the historical roots of ecological thoughts. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of nature as a source of solace and inspiration. Through the analysis of this poem, the researcher aims to underscore the significance of integrating literary perspective into contemporary environmental debates which in turn, enriches appreciation of both literature and environment.

Research Methodology

This study uses qualitative and interpretative method to analyze Marvell's poem, "The Garden". It intends to uncover eco-conscious elements of the poem through a close reading that examines its language, imagery, and themes. The paper employs eco-critical perspective with special attention to Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard and some other eco-critics. And, it attempts to show how Marvell's use of garden imagery and, his philosophical musings reflect such perspectives. Further theoretical and conceptual frameworks have been developed from extensive library research. The primary text has been examined, analyzed and interpreted by seeking insights from the published books, research journals and research articles as the secondary source. In

addition to it, the article locates the poem within the broader context of Seventeenth century ecological thought and literary traditions. This includes examining contemporary attitudes towards ecology and how Marvell's work reflects or diverges from these perspectives. Applying key concepts from eco-criticism, such as eco-consciousness, eco-feminism, and human-nature relationship, the theoretical framework provides an insight to examine the poem and its ecological aspects.

Results and Discussion

Eco-criticism is a newer discipline in the field of literature and its criticism. It is the study of literature and the environment where, scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. It takes an interdisciplinary point of view by analyzing the works of authors, researchers and poets in the context of ecological and environmental issues. Eco-criticism is an intentionally broad approach that is known by a number of other designations, including "green studies", "eco-poetics", and "environmental literary criticism." Similarly, various cultural and literary movements have taken place in the USA and throughout the world in the name of environmental justice, eco-feminism and queer ecological movement.

Eco-criticism aims to reflect human responses towards the environment as Cheryl Glotfelty asserts: "Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 18). It is a fact that it considers the reflection of the physical environment in literary texts. There is no official inauguration of eco-criticism; however, the development of eco-criticism in British Romantic studies can be traced back to Jonathan Bate who is often considered to be the first one who introduced this movement in the early 1990s. This new field of investigation was not limited to British Romantic Studies but, it was also expanded to the American literary and cultural studies due to the common ecological and environmental problems. This process incited the beginning of a movement called eco-criticism in the United States. Eco-criticism came into being as a separate discipline of study in the 1990s, although, the connection between man and his surrounding had always been a topic of discussion in the literary field.

The term eco-criticism was first coined by the US critic William Rueckert in an essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism." The aim of eco-criticism for Rueckert is to find the grounds upon which "the two communities the human, and the natural can coexist, cooperate and flourish in the biosphere" (p.107). Similarly, Greg Garrard cites Glotfelty's definition of this new idiom:

It is the study of new relationship between literature and the physical environment.

Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious

perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of the modes of production and economic class to its reading texts, eco-criticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Garrad, 2004, p. 13)

Garrad explores eco-criticism in a bit more detail; borrowing the ideas from other eco-critics he equates it with other literary and critical theories.

Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, is another landmark in this field of study. Regarding the concept of eco-criticism, Buell has suggested two slightly different definitions. Firstly, he defines it as the "study of the relation between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell, 1995, p. 430). His second definition of eco-criticism reads as "a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives more expressive of concern to explore environmental issues searchingly than of fixed dogmas about political solutions" (p. 430). Buell aimed to give literature a new place other than one which it was assigned to throughout the centuries.

Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's seminal work, *The Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), paved a way for Environmental Studies. Since then, critics changed their angels of vision and strived for bringing about a unity between man and nature with "one foot in literature and the other on land" (Glotfelty, p. 20). Glotfelty and Fromm highlight the connection between literature and nature. Another important work in this field of study is *Eco-Criticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures*, by Donelle Dreese. Dreese mentions a few issues that are part of the usual concerns of eco-criticism: "... how nature is presented, when it is represented, how the environmental crisis has influenced literature and how the concepts of the environment have evolved through the centuries (p.1). The task of an eco-critic for Dreese is to analyze how the nature is presented and represented in the literature and how much space the literature has given to the ecological and environmental degradation. Dreese further elaborates how the concept of environment has been changing through time.

"The Garden" is an extraordinary poem which is romantic in its expression, metaphysical in its word game and classical in its music. It is a romantic because it valorizes nature; it is a metaphysical because of its forceful arguments or conceits and; it is a classical because of its carefully perfected form and elevated language. Andrew Mcrac in *The Cambridge companion to Andrew Marvel* mentions that "to write about nature and the environment in Marvell's poetry is to risk accusations of simple – mindedness" (p. 1). He further notes that there is arguably some cause, given Marvell's repeated attention to the natural environment, to engage with the insights of the emergent body of 'eco-criticism', which is committed to exploring the ways in which ecological

discourses shape and inform literary texts.

The Garden is one of the most sublime and complicated poem. The poem can be analyzed from the lens of nature-writing or what is commonly known as eco-criticism. In *Introduction of Andrew Marvell*, Joseph M. Summers considers “The Garden” as “obviously the finest poem of rural solitude” (Summers, 1961, p. 14). “The Garden” is one of the supreme specimens of the genre called nature poetry or pastoral poetry, as Rosalie L. Colie in *My Echoing Song: Andrew Marvell's Poetry of Criticism*, writes that “The Garden” brings to its height, “the tradition of Renaissance garden poetry, at the same time refining and exploiting many other traditions not primarily associated with gardens (Colie, 2015, p. 14). It is significant to note that garden theme is one of the recurring and preponderant themes in Marvell’s different poems. Marvell represents different gardens in different garden poems in different ways. In “The Nymph complaining,” the beautiful garden is created to satisfy the demands of the creator-the heroine; whereas, in “Upon Appleton House” the garden is assumed as a paradisiacal stature with its pristine naivete.

The opening stanza of the poem extols the quietness of nature; the poet prefers contemplative life to din and bustle of men:

How vainly men themselves amaze,
to win the palm, the Oak, or bays.
And their incessant labours see,
crowned from some single herb or tree. (lines 1-4)

The poet argues that men very foolishly please themselves to win the palm, the Oak and the bay that are the symbols of victory, civic honors and great poetic achievements. The shade offered by the narrow verge of the leaf very wisely mocks at the toils of these men. In the garden, all the flowers and trees come close together and weave the garlands of peace and rest. The garden is a place for rest and recreation. The poet begins the poem by contrasting the nature with society and social life and criticizing the society and busy worldly life.

In the second stanza, Marvell personifies the quietness and innocence in the nature and speaks to them saying that he has at last found them after losing his time in men’s company. The persona of the poem says:

Fair quiet, have I found thee here,
and innocence thy sister dear!
Mistaken long, I sought you then
in busy company of men. (lines 9-12)

At this point of the poem, Marvell shows his contempt of anthropocentric world. The poet is fed up with city and civilization. He feels that the company of trees and flowers far excels the company of men and women living in the cities. If the sacred

plants of “Quiet” and “Innocence” grow among the plants of the city, they will find that the society of men in the city is very much rude in comparison to the garden. Marvell compares the repose of the garden with the restlessness of the cities where people keep themselves busy in getting and spending. He finds beauty, peace and simplicity in the garden. This is quite in contrast to the noise, restlessness of the humdrum life of the people of the city. In the city people are all the time busy and they find no rest there. In the garden, on the other hand, there is perfect calm and quietude. Life is simple there.

The poet keeps on glorifying garden. For him, the charm and loveliness of the garden far excel the beauty of the beloved:

No white nor red was ever seen
so amorous as this lovely green.
Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,
cut in these trees their mistress' name. (lines 17-20)

The lovers who carve the names of their beloved on the barks of trees act foolishly and cruelly. They do not know that the beauty of their beloved cannot be favorably compared with the beauty of the garden. The lovers behave cruelly in their heat of passion. The poet addresses the fair trees and assures that whenever he carves the name of his mistress on the bark of the tree, he will find that, instead of the name of his mistress, he will carve the name of trees.

Frank Kermode in *The Argument of Marvell's Garden* writes:

The garden is rich emblem The Gardens to which Marvell most directly alludes in his poem are the Garden of Eden, the Barthly Paradise, and that Garden to which both, Stoic and Epicurean as well as Platonist, retire for solace of meditation. (qtd. in Michael Wilding, p. 129)

It is a rich symbol which reminds one of the symbolic gardens of the Middle Ages. It is also a symbol of the biblical Eden Garden where men enjoyed heavenly life before its downfall. The poet further prioritizes the greenness of the leaves and the plants over the whiteness and redness of the women. The beauties of the gardens are far more attractive and erotic than the dazzling beauties of the ladies. The poet is shocked to see the cruel effort of the cruel and foolish lovers who carve the names of their beloved with knives on the barks of the trees with a view for immortalizing their names without realizing that real beauty resides elsewhere.

Marvell brings allusion from theology. The classical Gods like Apollo and Pan who ran after mortal beauties like Daphne and Syrinx and who ultimately escaped their clutches by turning into a laurel and a reed respectively: “The gods, that mortal beauty chase,/still in a tree did end their race”(lines 27-28). In the process of exploiting the women, nature is finally exploited by men. Nature is here equated with women. Commenting on this parallel oppression of woman and nature, Greta Gaard argues that

the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are inextricably linked; both are dominated and exploited by patriarchal culture that views them as resource to be controlled and consumed (Gaard, 1993). Both nature and women reproduce and nurture the human beings. The oppression of both women and nature are the basic agenda of the eco-feminists who are of the view that nature vis-a-vis women are exploited by the patriarchal society.

The garden is not only blissful place for men but it is for the gods to live in. It is the best retreat for them. The persona of the poem continues to praise the abundant fruits, vines, flowers, and grass in the garden. For him life in a garden is rich and plenteous. In the garden, ripe apples fall at the feet of the poet. Over ripe grapes crush their juice into his mouth. Delicious fruits fall into his hands. The garden appears very much like what the Garden of Eden must have been before the creation of Eve. Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey* finds comfort in the bosom of nature and, Keats wants to enjoy the green countryside in his pastoral poetry. Marvell too, wants to drink the sap of nature to the last degree. In the fifth stanza the poet finds physical recreation, solitude and bodily ecstasy. The poet leads a "Wondrous life" as apples drop on his head, vine crush their wine on his mouth, the "nectarines", the inquisitive peach themselves reach the poet's hand. He stumbles on the melons and is ensnared with flowers: "Stumbling on melons, as I pass/ Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass" (lines 39-40). Rosalie L. Colie states that stanza five reports a genuinely climatic experience, culminating in a loss of will in the poet, the plants beloved and in his fall. Colie further argues: "Even if the poet falls, his "fall" is on grass and therefore, it is a comfortable and soothing one unlike the "Fall" of Adam and Eve mentioned in the Bible" (p.7). The poet's fall is not just like the downfall of Adam and Eve. Their fall is fall from the heavenly Garden of Eden, where as the poet falls onto the garden, not from the garden.

The poets mind withdraws from the inferior pleasures of worldly life. Far from the madding crowd, the poet has now become one with his nature. The poet embarks on the creative faculty of men-that sublime imagination-which transcends everything it perceives. The mind is like an ocean which contains within itself a vast number of things unseen and unknown. But the mind not only reproduces but also creates and recreates. The mind can annihilate or destroy all that is made; it can reduce everything to a non-entity: "Annihilating all that made/ to a green thought in a green shade" (lines 47-48). The word "green" is a favorite word for Marvell; it is a pet word for him. In different poems, it is connected with grass, buds and even children. It is a rejuvenating which has a renovative power. The poet means to say that in comparison with a green thought this material world is of no importance, of no value. The thought is green because the garden itself is green. The "green" is a color of freshness, vitality, energy, vivacity, recreation and retirement. It also stands for innocence and solitude. The poet now anchors on intellectual

recreation. His mind moves from physical pleasure to extreme metaphysical delight. The phrase “all that’s made” comes from Virgil’s seventh “Eclogue”.

William Empson in *Literary criticism: A Reading*, states that the poet reduces the whole material world into a green thought or the material world is of no value, in comparison to a green thought. Similarly, Colie comments: “In this garden intellect and character are so cultivated, so rarefied, that the spiritual garden, the real garden and the garden of the world can all be identified with the garden of mind” (p. 170). Marvell’s recurring use of green with thought and shade carries the green agendas of eco-criticism. In the world of imagination, the poet imagines himself sitting by the sliding foot of the fountains. His soul, casting aside his bodily frame, sits at the mossy root of some fruit tree. Soul glides into the branches of the tree and sings a melodious song. The soul of the poet sharpens its silver wings to prepare itself for higher and longer flights.

The garden is planted by God who has skillfully managed to see that flowers and trees conquer time. The sweetness, tranquility and innocence of the garden outlast man and survive: “How the skillful gardener drew /Of flowers and herbs this dial new” (lines 65-66). In the last stanza of the poem, the poet views that nature conquers time. She lives forever and her pleasures don’t die. Flowers and trees are the symbols of triumph over decay and the other morbid influence of time. The last stanza provides a shift from garden to gardener. The poet mentions the sublime artistry of the “skilful gardener” who planted the flowers and herbs in such a way as to form a sun-dial. The poet valorizes the harmonious existence of the natural world.

Throughout the poem the poet idolizes and venerates “the happy garden state”. The eco-critics are concerned with the worship of nature and the celebration of the purest ecstasy that is to be found only in the nature. Thomas Jajtner in *Marvell's Green Thought(s): The Paradoxes of Marvell's Nature Poetry*, maintains that “The Garden” thematizes the basic polarity between the frenzied “uncessant labours”, the futile pursuit for success and the stultifying social life as well as the context of the “Original”, prelapsarian” state of humanity, in which Adam experienced both joy about the idyllic garden state. He further writes; “However, for Marvell, the idyll is the very opposite of this ideal: it is a world “without a mate” (13). The “happy garden state” thus becomes just a solitary projection of an ideal, but endangered world in which the only counterpart is the natural world.

Eventually, Marvell compares his garden with the biblical Eden Garden. He thinks that there was heavenly bliss in the garden where man first walked without his mate. That garden had purity and sweetness which was more than enough for man to live in peace. But, God created Eve for Adam and after her creation, Adam lost the paradise. Before that he enjoyed double heaven: the garden itself was a heaven; and Adam’s solitariness was another heaven. The garden in the poem is an allegory of “Eden Garden”, where Adam,

the first man enjoyed the heavenly pleasure, before its downfall.

Conclusion

This paper excavates the eco-conscious dimension of “The Garden,” revealing its engagement with environmental themes and its critique of human exploitation of nature. Through a close reading of the poem, this article exposes how Marvell’s work reflects a deep ecological concern and; why he advocates for symbiotic relationship between human and non-human worlds. By comparing the garden with the biblical “Eden Garden”, Marvell not only appreciates beauty and tranquility of nature but also attacks selfish human motives which are solely responsible for the downfall of heavenly garden. Marvell argues that human beings are misguided by artifice and corruption of human society. They seek solace and serenity in the city and civilization; however, ultimate happiness can be sought in the realm of nature. Marvell’s insight of respectful interaction with nature echoes contemporary calls for eco-consciousness and environmental justice. Furthermore, “The Garden” is rich in terms of its green imageries and philosophical reflections, which in turn, serves to the green agendas of eco-criticism. Through this poem, Marvell draws attention to the everlasting allure of nature as a source of inspiration and joy. To conclude, the poem appeals to the readers to re-evaluate their relationship with nature and, to adopt more sustainable approach to ecology and environment.

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