



SITUATING THE BARD IN CONTEMPORANEITY: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to study William Shakespeare's tragic play *Macbeth* (1606) in the light of eco-critical theory. The revisiting of the text with an eco-centric perspective involves the foregrounding of the treatment of nature versus man. The emphasis is to view social, cultural, and political discursive practices by locating the anthropocentric attitude embedded in a text. The supposition of superiority of man over nature is questioned thus providing voice to nature. This generates eco-consciousness among readers. Moreover, the identification of nature as a separate entity for its own sake points at all the anthropocentric practices. The eco-centric study also issues warning to man against the injudicious exploitation of nature and its resources for his never ending needs. Thus, it becomes essential for man to formulate symbiotic ways for harmonious coexistence between man and nature. The study becomes relevant for it is able to explicate the backgrounding and anthropomorphisation of nature in Elizabethan text by reflecting the contemporary ecological concerns temporally and spatially.

Keywords: Ecocentrism, Anthropocentrism, Backgrounding, Anthropomorphisation

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The close reading of a literary text through the critical lens of ecocriticism involves the identification of the representation of nature in the text. Ecocriticism is a systematic area of enquiry that emerged in the late 1980s in the USA and in the early 1990s in the UK. Cheryll Glotfelty in her seminal work *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) defines Ecocriticism as "the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Thus, the investigation opens a new area of inquiry. All literary texts are embedded in the material reality of human existence. The eco-critical perspective becomes a medium to generate eco-consciousness among the readers by voicing against the cosmetic depiction of nature and its surroundings. It provides a ground to reveal the power struggle inherent between culture/nature

dichotomies. This paper attempts to study William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) in the light of eco-critical theory by revealing various issues concerned with the representation of nature, natural phenomena, and physical environment in a literary text. It highlights gross anthropocentrism by focussing on subtle discursive practices that deny centrality to nature. An eco-critical reading typically identifies the backgrounding and instrumentalisation of nature. It focuses on the human denial of nature's independent existence as a physical entity for its own sake. The non-human entities are anthropomorphised to complement human emotions. The eco-critical angle also magnifies the metaphorical use of natural phenomena like lightning, storm, wind etc. in any literary text. Further, representation of plants and animals is

studied as being categorised according to their utility in a human centric culture. The study highlights the perpetration of such practices through institutions, religious practices, cultural practices and manuscripts that indoctrinate the dominion of man over nature and its resources. It essentially focuses on teasing out the subtle underpinnings of anthropocentric attitude in a narrative.

Investigating Shakespeare's *King Lear* from an eco-critical perspective, Ralph W. Black observes upon watching the cinematic version of the play:

But I was struck even more by the beginning: A map of the kingdom is unrolled. It is painted across the tanned hides of a small herd of royal deer. The old Sovereign uses his sword to symbolically divide his domain among his daughters. Even before the daughters have spoken, or refused to speak the trajectory of their love, there is this transgression: the commodified landscape is sliced up and parcelled out to the highest rhetorical bidder. For a moment I wonder about my understanding of the tragedy, about what hubristic act instigates Lear's fall, about the significance of the natural world in the play, the moments of clarity that all seem to take place outside - in a storm, on the moors, at the seashore. ("What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Ecocriticism")

It is quite evident that anthropocentrism as a discourse has been internalized by humanity, and we often fail to acknowledge our own errant ways. Investigating Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through the eco-critical lens brings nature into discussion. Nature can be selected as an object of study for Shakespeare has widely used different terrains, animals and natural elements as background settings in the play. Shakespeare in *Macbeth* has made use of natural terrains like desert, heath, park and field for portrayal of significant actions in the play. These terrains can be divided using Peter Barry's categorization of natural landscapes in his book *Beginning Theory* (2013) that categorises the different areas of physical environment in relation to proximity of humans with nature as: "Area one: 'the wilderness' (e.g. deserts, oceans, uninhabited

continents / Area two: 'the scenic sublime' (e.g. forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfalls) / Area three: 'the countryside' (e.g. hills, fields, woods) / Area four: 'the domestic picturesque' (parks, gardens, lanes)" (246). It is clear from this categorization that there is a subsequent movement from nature towards culture, such that Area four is nothing more than culturized and ornamentalized environment where culture dominates the nature. The categorisation also exposes the interrelationship of culture with nature. It is quite evident that physical divisions falling under 'area one' are less exploited vicinities by mankind. But this category also gets affected by cultural activities like global warming, and as such, as several theorists claim, pristine nature is lost, and forever.

In *Macbeth* Shakespeare explores all the areas, but a large portion of the decisive unfolding of the plot takes place in Areas 1 and 2, which have also been anthropomorphised to reflect human emotions, ambitions, and also the subsequent downfall. The depiction of 'area one' and 'area two' are associated with the portrayal of events linked with cosmic forces like fate, destiny etc. in *Macbeth*.

In *Macbeth*, the area one, 'the Wilderness' includes the desert and the area two, 'the scenic sublime' includes the heath near the forest. It is here, in these areas that action rises and also eventually falls. An important aspect of the Shakespearean depiction of the Area 1 and Area 2 is that it is othered from human, and is made to bear the onus of responsibility of human ambition. In the beginning of the play, Macbeth declares, 'Upon this blasted heath you stop our way' (i.iii). The eco-critical angle views this categorisation anthropocentrically. The dramaturgy and the first scene's setting of the play involves 'area one' that is in 'A desert place', accompanied with 'Thunder and Lightning' also with the entry of three witches, 'Enter three Witches'. It is quite interesting that the bard uses the natural elements of lightning, thunder, terrain and witches as chimerical and as cosmic forces like destiny, fate as an agent to influence and malign Macbeth which he acknowledges, 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen. In addition Banquo says, 'That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth. Thus, very skilfully instead of pointing at the

darkness of human heart Shakespeare imposes on the atmosphere. Macbeth's unbridled ambition that might have flared up after the victory at the battlefield against the rebel, Macdonald and the traitor, Thane of Cawdor. In the narrative, Macbeth, instead of owning his dark desires imposes them on external factors that occurred, 'Upon this blasted heath' (i.iii) and herald them as, 'prophetic greeting' (i.iii). The aside in which Macbeth utters, 'Present fears are less than horrible imaginings'(i.iii) reiterates the cosmic intervention at heath that triggered Macbeth in compelling him to murder King Duncan.

Thus, Shakespeare shows the inevitability of cosmic design to trap Macbeth in its clutches. The Shakespearean hero is portrayed in the light of succumbing to the incident at heath. The momentary encounter with the unrealistic images of three witches, 'into the air; and what seemed corporal melted' (i.iii) keeps hovering over Macbeth to cast its spell. Thus Shakespeare very deftly depicts the corrupting agent to be nature in maligning the valorous nature of Macbeth. But taking a close enquiry into the situation the question arises: Was it the incident at heath? Or was it the growth of unchecked Macbeth's ambition?

Interestingly, in the play, all decisions that lead to eventual doom of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are initiated in the wilderness, as if implying that human nature is inherently pure, and that a volatile and impetuous natural surrounding infuses in the human the malign spirit in him/her. This is gross anthropocentrism where the human is not only seen as a centre, but also the stable centre, while nature is seen as a flux reacting upon an unwilling human. The subsequent execution of the ambition—in this case the murder of King Duncan is carried out within the confines of a castle, a constructed area that reflects not only human's need for safety and comfort, but also an internalised need for power and fame that is reflected in the conquest of nature. It must be noted here that if the blasted heath infused ambition in Macbeth, the walls of the castle led a traumatized Lady Macbeth into a state of psychosis. One needs to ponder which effect (if any) is greater. The claustrophobic confines of the castle drive Lady Macbeth into madness.

Thus, it is rather problematic when Shakespeare shifts the onus of responsibility from a maligned human heart to an innocuous heath.

The eco-critical study also reveals the perpetuation of dichotomies of culture/nature through cultural and linguistic constructs. The language is used as a tool to attach significance to an object according to the cultural acceptance of a place. And this is how all non-human entities are perceived. Moreover their existence is seen through the anthropocentric use. The existence of non-human entities for its own sake is a blatant denial and which is deeply rooted socially, culturally, psychologically and politically. Shakespeare in the play instead of addressing Macbeth a killer and Lady Macbeth as ominous uses the objective correlative of raven to foreshadow the details of future events. The grotesqueness of the crime of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is shifted by imposing it on the scavenging nature of bird raven and its 'hoarse croak' is associated to the enunciation of evil beginnings. Also its dark plumage is related to bad omen. But all of these associations are cultural constructs and are unrelated to the existence of the species of Raven. Thus it becomes a methodology devised by humans to bypass the brutality of human action and impose it on nature and its resources.

The discussion even brings into notice the apathetic attitude ingrained in man towards nature. The study becomes interesting when it points at the use of non-human entities as a trope to facilitate the illegitimate and invalid actions of humans. This particular trait has been identified by an American Wordsworth's critic Alan Liu who states in *The Green Studies Reader*, "Nature is the name under which we use the nonhumans to validate the human, to interpose mediation able to make humanity more easy with itself" (qtd. in Gifford 175). The sequence of events in the play from the beginning to the end reflects on the forceful imposition of immoral actions on nature. That supports the identification of environment as passive and inherent to fulfil the needs of mankind. But eco-centric attitude warns against the injudicious and over-exploitation of nature by issuing apocalyptic warnings. Hence, it becomes essential to delimit the cultural encroachments for symbiotic coexistence of human

with nature. It can be understood with the help of a very famous quote, "It isn't language which has a hole in its Ozone layer?" (151) from Kate Soper's seminal book *What is Nature?* This quote explicates the negligence towards the degradation and the injudicious exploitation of nature and its natural resources. Shakespeare in the play also issues the warning to Macbeth through the mouth of witches not to tamper the nature otherwise it can bring his decline.

"Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him" (iv.i)

But Macbeth derides the warning for he considered his authority over nature. Hence witnessing from the above discussion, it becomes evident that Macbeth through the support of cultural and discursive practices has been able to exercise his control over nature. Macbeth simply considers nature to be passive.

That will never be
Who can impress the forest, bid the tree
Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet
bodements! Good!
Rebellion's head, rise never till the wood
Of Birnam rise, and our high-placed
Macbeth
Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath
To time and mortal custom. (iv.i)

And this aspect clearly indicates the embedded belief of superiority of man over nature in a culture. The nature and its resources have been continuously harnessed for the use of mankind. The natural vicinities are incessantly being trespassed by human invasions causing harm to the ecological system. Shakespeare reiterates this perception of oblivion towards nature through the portrayal of disbelief of Macbeth in the warning issued by witches. In fact, it reveals the deep rooted ideological belief of nature being passive and giving by affirming the denial on part of human to acknowledge any kind of counter reaction from nature. Interestingly, as in the narrative, the apocalyptic catastrophe that Macbeth encounters at the end depicts the outcome of prophecy but not as a result of Macbeth's action. Thus, the use nature and its elements in *Macbeth* strongly advocate the dominion of man over nature.

The cutting of the boughs from the Birnam forest to shield the palace merely reinforces the validity of prophecy that can be understood as a cultural tool to validate the invalid actions of mankind. However, an eco-centric approach perceives Macbeth's end because of the ecological disaster. It would consider that excessive deforestation of nearby forest had led to his decline. Hence, the text is essentially anthropocentric. A subverted eco-critical reading on the other hand, exposes the hierarchical relationship between nature and culture, and also establishes that imperialism and deforestation of land go simultaneously. And this becomes evident in the play *Macbeth* through the rebel against the tyrannical rule of Macbeth.

Much like Black's reading of *King Lear*, this paper seeks to expose the internalized anthropocentrism in humans. It further establishes that our old canonical texts can be revisited through a fresh perspective to uncover covert ideologies, and also affirms that such an exercise is pertinent in the contemporary times of gross hierarchisation of our relationships, in this case the humans' relationship with their physical environment. For Richard Kerridge, "To read ecocritically is therefore to read from an extremely specific present. In this sense, eco-critical reading is as far from reading in search of timeless truths and values as one could get, though it is in part a search for global truths and values" (194). Literature needs to wake up to the current ecological crisis, and ecocriticism is one sure step towards it.

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