



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

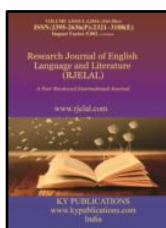
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

ETHNIC GREEN ATTITUDE Vs. THE COLONIAL UNETHICAL ATTITUDE

Dr. E. KRISHNAN NAMBOOTHIRI

Associate Professor of English, S.D. College, Alappuzha, Kerala, India-688 003

Email: krishcheeravallil@gamil.com



ABSTRACT

The Present ecocrisis the world over is the result of the human attitude of irresponsibility and exploitation to nature. This situation of widespread ecological disorder and disharmony has emerged over centuries as a result of illogical human concept of limitless progress. This ideology of extensive exploitation of nature has been initiated and promoted by the colonial masters in Europe as well as in their colonies all over the world. The exploitative attitude of the whites to natives, their culture, language as well as nature has considerably caused the current situation of ecological crisis in the erstwhile colonies. An attempt has been made in the paper to analysis the present issues related to nature in terms of colonialism.

Introduction

The ecological harmony kept by the natives of the colonies for thousands of years was destabilized within a few years by the colonizers. Even after Independence, the impact of colonialism continues to dominate India and Canada. The case of Northern Ireland, constitutionally an essential part of the United Kingdom, is not different even after its quasi-independence in 1922. The ecological situation has persistently become grim in these former colonies. Colonialism had brought upon the natives a sense of radical dispossession of their homeland as they were cut off from their language and culture.

Discussion

For the colonists, language was a powerful tool, along with their possession of the natives' land and power over them, to uproot the ethnic culture in order to facilitate their environmental encroachment on and exploitation of the colonies. They knew that the language of a nation is more than a set of linguistic symbols for communication, as the world-view, the psychological approach to realities, and the value system of the people are determined by their language. The colonizers had

made conscious efforts to distort the linguistic pattern of the natives, which had affected their cultural mind-set by redefining their ecological perceptions. The ecologically modified native culture was separated from nature as a result of the language shift.

During the colonial period, hundreds of speech communities in different parts of the world suffered serious setbacks in their struggle against the hegemony of the English language. The Sanskrit language in India, the Celtic languages in Ireland, and the native Indian languages in Canada were subsumed under the English language and along with them disappeared a world of native cultural perceptions of sublime ecological insight.

The loss of the native linguistic pattern of a society means the loss of its link with nature, which, in turn, will bring about serious consequences on the ecological ambience of a place. A shift in language redefines and remoulds the fundamental visions of a nation which decides the attitude of the people to nature. The linguistic pattern of a community develops out of an ecological context in which they live. Hence, language plays a vital role in establishing an organic bond between humans and

nature. Drawing attention to the close association between language and nature Susan Lynne Knutson quotes Plato's idea: "The categorization of reality, which language embodies, is a reflection of the categories of nature . . ." (71). Ethnolinguists have found the intense influence of language on human activities and attitudes. Culture, language and nature are, thus, co-relational. Even a slight change in any one of these factors will certainly affect the other two factors. The emergence of ecolinguistics in the 1990s elaborates the interrelation between language and its environment. Ecolinguistics has come out of the ecological notion that "Every entity exists in an *interdependency* with all the other entities and the environment" and "The form of existence of an entity is determined by its *interactivity* with and in its environment" (qtd. in Fill 8). The settlers have very cleverly introduced linguistic euphemism in order to hide their agenda of exploiting nature. The very term "development" is ecological euphemism as it gives the impression of modifying something for the benefit of the world. But the development in the present situation has proved maldevelopment as it badly affects both nature and humans in the long run. Beth Schultz has given many words and phrases introduced by the settlers to cover up their antiecolological agenda. The word "clearing" is one such word that gives a pleasant feeling. But settlers have cleared the vegetation, causing widespread ecological depletion in the colonies. Similarly "clearfelling", "timber harvesting", "global warming", "green warming" etc also are such ecological euphemisms (111-112).

The colonial as well as the post-Independence period reflects the irresistible supremacy of the European materialistic attitude on Indian sensibilities. The colonial cultural hegemony had rewritten the socio-cultural scenario of India. Consequently, the ecological patterns of India had been damaged under colonial dominance. In fact, the ecological breakdown that India faces at present originated during the colonial age owing to the introduction of new attitudes and approaches to life, language and nature by the colonial "masters". The colonists subjugated the natives either by using their power or by creating in them the feeling that the whites' culture is superior to their own. There

had been a deliberate attempt on the part of the imperialists to brand customs and practices of India along with its language and literature as obscene. The British introduced English literature in India by the passing of the Charter Act of 1813 under the pretext of reforming the native education as part of civilizing them. The colonizers created the impression that the western culture and literature were far superior to that of the natives. The classics of India like *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* were branded as obscene and immoral by the whites and in their place they prescribed the English literature

The claims of English as a great language are further questioned by the fact that it was only a third language during Norman French occupation in England. Ismail Talib comments on the unimportance of the English language in England: "Indeed, so unimportant was English in England, especially in the first two centuries of Norman occupation, that there was a real danger that the language would simply die out" (1). Gauri Viswanathan refers to the irony that English literature became a subject in the curriculum of India long before it was institutionalized in England. The strong impact of the English language and literature on the psyche of Indian natives is evident from this undue importance received by English in India. Viswanathan observes: "As early as the 1820s, when the classical curriculum still reigned supreme in England despite the strenuous efforts of some concerned critics to loosen its hold, English as the study of culture and not simply the study of language had already found a secure place in the British Indian curriculum" (3). The great importance of the English language given by colonials is put to question by the fact that England itself and the English language are only parts of Britain. Wales, Scotland and Ireland and the languages (Welsh, Scottish and Irish) also are in Britain. Thus it is wrong to consider England and Britain as the same and English as the common language of Britain. It is a fact even today that except in the civilized cities in Britain, the English language is not well received by people. The institutionalization of English in India was the major device used by the imperialists to

subjugate the landscape as well as the mindscape of India.

The English language, for the colonials, was a tool to implement their market-oriented culture and its much-acclaimed superiority over Indian language was just a mask for economic and environmental exploitation in tune with the Cartesian philosophy of Europe. In other words, the English language was indeed a metaphor for economic, political, cultural and ecological imperialism of the West in India. As Thiong'o comments, bullet was the means of physical subjugation whereas language was the means of spiritual subjugation used by the colonizers in the colonies (287). English was introduced by the colonials with the false impression that it had been an important language of the world; and that the English culture was superior to that of the natives. This intention is evident in the words of J. Farish in a minute introduced in the Bombay Presidency: "The Natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could possibly have" (qtd. in Viswanathan 2).

i Regional language and literature in India developed as a result of foreign invasions at the expense of Sanskrit language from the twelfth to the eighteenth century. Later, the English language, literature as well as culture made their inroads into Indian life since the Battle of Plassey in 1757. Though the introduction of the new language helped Indians to communicate their problems to the world, it caused a sense of dispossession in Indian minds. P. K. Rajan estimates the effect of the colonialism on the Indian cultural scenario:

English language and literature became a powerful tool for the colonizer in this battle. The impact of this new hegemony on our cultural life was peculiar in its own way. On the one hand, it tended to undermine and supersede the reigning native traditions and literatures, and on the other, it nourished them, enriched them and altered them in a significant way. On the one hand, it sought to anglicize Indian cultural life to the extent it subserved their

material interests; on the other, it attempted to rediscover the glory of ancient Sanskrit India. (14)

The observation of P.K. Rajan seems to be right that Indian traditions and literatures were superseded by the western cultural and linguistic invasion. But his findings on Sanskrit language and literature seem to be conflicting and contradictory as the present condition of the same stands an evidence to show how adversely did colonialism affect them. It is true that many foreign scholars attempted to understand the glory of ancient Sanskrit language and literature. Also, many of them translated the Vedic literature, though awkwardly. These initiations did not do any good to India, culturally or linguistically or ecologically. The whites showed great interest in Sanskrit language and literature not to promote the traditional cultural base of India but to successfully implement their political and religious agenda in the colony. When Sanskrit classics were read and enjoyed by the Europeans, the colonized were made to believe them as obscene and substandard. Gauri Viswanathan highlights this double stance kept by the colonists towards the Indian classics:

A play like Kalidas' *Shakuntala*, which delighted Europeans for its pastoral beauty and lyric charm and led Horace Wilson, a major nineteenth-century Sanskrit scholar, to call it the jewel of Indian literature, was disapproved of as a text for study in Indian schools and colleges, and the judgement that 'the more popular forms of [Oriental literature] are marked with the greatest immorality and impurity' held sway. (5-6)

Shakuntala has ecological validity for its anthropomorphic representation of nature and denying the opportunity to understand the text resulted in losing an insightful world of ecological wisdom for the natives. In the text the Ashrama or forest hermitage is presented as a contrast to the evils of civilization. The inmates of the Asrama live in ecological harmony with nature. At the time of her departure the heroine bids farewell not only to her human friends in the hermitage but to the animals, plants and trees. The early Sanskrit literature since the Vedas presents lives of such ecological wisdom

as presented in *Shakuntala*. The hermits led a modest life in the forest without endangering vegetation and animals there. The trees were not cut down for making space for Ashram. They usually built their thatched huts in open spaces. They never cut trees for firewood. Only fallen branches of trees were used for household purposes. Even when they wanted to break small branches of trees, they took it with reverence and asking permission of the trees. The first verse of Krihna Yajurveda starts with such a mantra in which the hermits seek permission of the tree to break its tender branch for conducting religious rites, not for personal gain, but for the prosperity of the entire land. M.G.S. Narayanan draws our attention to the contrast between the ecological significance of Ashrama culture and the modern concept of development process undertaken by humans for many centuries. The Ashramites led a life without disturbing the ecology of nature:

They gathered fruits and grains from the forest instead of organizing agriculture. They were not interested in trade. They did not construct roads or employ packs of animals and vehicles. They did not use woven clothes. They had no schools or markets or hospitals or theatres.... If we study the concept as found in the classics, we may find that the secret formula was the transformation of the mind. They promoted discipline in the place of desire. In place of wage labour and commodity production, they chose meditation and sacrifice. They were no masters and servants, but only teachers and disciples. (ASLE Conference 2006)

The Vedas, which communicate powerful ecological messages, are composed in Sanskrit and the colonial resistance to them resulted in the denial of ecological awareness to the natives since the eighteenth century. Therefore, when the Indian classics and Vedas, composed in Sanskrit, were distanced away from them, the settlers managed to bring about marked changes in the cultural attitudes of the natives, which ultimately rewrote their relationship with nature in terms of the anti-ecological visions of Europe. The shift in attitude to

language and literature along with the political power of the colonialists brought about drastic changes in the "eco-scape" of India. The policies of forest management in the continental mould were introduced in India in the second half of the nineteenth century. Since then, the forests have been viewed as places of rich resources for economic development, not as sacred places of worship and rituals in order to keep the symbiotic balance in tact. The colonials took over the protection of Indian forests from the locals and dictated terms of forest laws preventing the locals using the resources that they had traditionally enjoyed. The colonists, on the pretext of conserving the forests, with their new forest policies, aimed at the exploitation of forest resources for rapid industrial and economic growth. The tribals who kept harmony with nature were forced either to shift from their places or to accept the exploitative attitude due to the anti-ecological policies of the whites. The Warlis, a tribal community of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Nagar Haveli, were adversely affected by the British intervention in their richly forested homelands. The government brutally evicted the Warli villages in deep forests and forcibly resettled them on the fringes. The Warlis, in spite of their long tradition of struggle against external forces, were vanquished. In 1876, over 4 lakh acres of forestland was handed over to the timber lobby, causing irreparable damage to the environment. The attitude of the colonists to environment was pragmatic, utilitarian and market-oriented, which stood in opposition to the traditional Indian attitude of sensing the intrinsic value of the environment. Contrary to the European visions, the native tribes looked upon forest as the only medium by which people could hand over the past to the future. The unison of humans, nature, culture, and spirituality formed the mosaic of the native's life. The totemic system of the Oraons of Bihar holds testimony to their close association with nature. They have 16 beast totems, 12 bird totems, 14 fish and other aquatic animal totems, 19 vegetative totems and 2 mineral totems (Prabhu 43). The Bhima Saoras of Orissa consider the clearing of a patch of forest for cultivation as an encroachment on the right of other creatures of the forest. Colonialism marginalized

the existential symbiotic and holistic way of many ethnic sects of India.

Conclusion

It is high time that the ethnic green attitude of indigenous people was revalidated to face the ecological challenges of the present world. Culture, language and other native beliefs have a very prominent role in bringing back to the world the long lost ecological harmony between man and nature. The old world order did not consider nature a binary opposite to culture. Rather it considered nature as culture itself.

Works Cited

- Fill, Alwin and Peter Muhlhausler, eds. *The Ecological Reader: Language, Ecology and Environment*. London: Continuum, 2001.
- Prabhu, Pradip. "Nature, Culture and Diversity: The Indigenous Way of Life." Kothari, et.al. 39-82.
- Rajan, P.K. "Indian English Literature." Litcrit June-Dec. 2006. 11-23.
- Talib, Ismail S. *The Language of Post Colonial Literature: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Thiong'O, Ngugiwa. "The Language of African Literature." Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995. 285-90.
- Viswanathan, Gouri. *Masks of the Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. London: Faber, 1989.