



A DISCOURSE ON ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS IN C.S.LEWIS'S *PERELANDRA*

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ABSTRACT

Eco-consciousness is inevitable to human for the harmonious relationship with the nonhuman world. An attempt has been made to show how man's consciousness towards nature enables to adore and safeguard it in the novel *Perelandra* by C. S. Lewis. *Perelandra* is shown as an awe-inspiring and luminous environment where the natural world exists in peace and harmony. Lewis highlights how an eco-conscious man marvels at the amazing beauty of his environment and wonder at the splendour of hills, valleys, forests, birds, animals, seas and fishes. Such an admiration is possible only when he has strong attachment and deep love towards nature. When a man learns to see the beauties of his environment he will be conscious to protect it. An individual's love for nature culminates in an intense concern for the world around them and is sensitive enough to cherish all beings.

Key words: harmonious relationship, attachment, beauty, nature, awareness, eco-sensitive.

Down through the ages, nature is a subject which has fascinated writers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats and others. Nature-oriented literature focuses on creating awareness in man regarding his environment. The term 'ecocriticism' was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 to refer to "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (107). An explicit definition of ecocriticism is given by Cheryl Glotfelty that it is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Thus ecocriticism studies the human-nature relationships in a literary text and such writing serves to regain a sense of "environmental consciousness" (Rigby 162). Nature-consciousness is inevitable for the harmonious relationship of the human and the nonhuman world.

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) is one of the significant British writers of the twentieth century who focuses on raising eco-consciousness among his readers through his writings. He has

become popular worldwide in recent times due to the televised production of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis was a recognised Professor at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. His writings comprise fairy tales, science fictions and apologetics. As a creative writer Lewis has a unique environmental vision. He emphasises to have a harmonious correlation between man and the natural world. Lewis's space trilogy titled *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), *That Hideous Strength* (1945) are his renowned works.

Man can enjoy a receptive bonding with the environment when his eyes are opened to perceive nature's beauty. In the science fiction, *Perelandra* Lewis invites readers to be filled with a sense of awe and wonder at "our place in the cosmos, including our relationships to other species, to the land we live on" (Dickerson 158). With his creative potency Lewis creates a planet where the "pristine vigour is unabated" (Thoreau 24).

He exhibits the primeval wood of Eden with its unspoiled virginity.

Contrary to the writings of other science fiction writers who depict life in other planets as dangerous and peopled with inhuman monsters, Lewis's *Perelandra* is depicted as an appealing place with its enchanting environment. Elwin Ransom, the principal character in the novel, travels in a coffin to the planet named Venus named Perelandra. He is overwhelmed by the natural environment of Perelandra. It is a floating island with uneven shape and many curves. Hence Ransom feels his environment to be totally different from anything he has ever experienced on earth and Lewis enables the reader to experience and enjoy with Ransom, each new sight and sound. He finds himself swimming in the sea of Perelandra where he drinks water which gives him a quite "astonishing pleasure" (*Perelandra* 38) and the water that he drinks there gives him "the strange sense of excessive pleasure which seemed somehow to be communicated to him through all his senses at once" (*Perelandra* 40). Ransom's eco-sensitivity facilitates to sense the wonders offered by nature in Perelandra. His intense admiration for his surrounding environment is explicit when he perceives:

The water gleamed, the sky burned with gold, but all was rich and dim, and his eyes fed upon it undazzled and unaching. The very names of green and gold . . . are too harsh for the tenderness, the muted iridescence, of that warm, maternal, delicately gorgeous world. It was mild to look upon as evening, warm like summer noon, gentle and winning like early dawn. It was altogether pleasurable. (*Perelandra* 39)

This exposes his sensitivity for the environment as he enjoys its enchanting beauty. In this connection Donald E Glover declares: "The physical descriptions which almost overwhelm the narrative before it gets well underway, indicate Lewis's delight in filling this paradisaical world with the sensuous and romantic attraction which had drawn him since childhood. Here more fully and completely than anywhere else, we feel his commitment to sensual beauty" (96). In fact, the descriptive passages reveal Ransom's profound consciousness towards the grandeur of nature.

In his re-creation of Paradise before the Fall, Lewis imagines a life quite unlike earth, "To be naked yet warm, to wander among summer fruits and lie in sweet heather" (*Perelandra* 48). This exceptional picture of life on Perelandra represents "something that may be enjoyed for its own sake, and not without profit" (Dickerson 185). Such an experience proves the first principle of the deep ecology which stresses to value the inherent worth of the nonhuman world: "The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth have value in themselves" and these "values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes" (qtd. in Sumathy 88). The nonhuman creatures have innate worth irrespective of their value to man. It is necessary to "care for the earth because . . . animals, plants, and entire ecosystems are valuable for their own sake" (Bouma-Prediger 165). Hence in *Perelandra* Lewis's Ransom wonders at the uniqueness of the natural world around him.

Solitude enables Ransom to gaze further deeply at his surroundings and refines his attachment towards nature. Sitting cross-legged on the edge of the island, he surveys the place with profound solemnity and contemplates the marvellous beauty of nature. Ransom perceives the whole island dazzling in blue colour and feels the fresh and natural air. He observes:

. . . heather-like vegetables . . . long lonely valley with a copper-coloured floor bordered on each side by gentle slopes clothed in a kind of many coloured forest. . . an island if you like, with hills and valleys which changed places every minute. . . . And that is the nature of the floating islands of Perelandra" (*Perelandra* 44).

Thus Ransom experiences a "blessed relaxation" (*Perelandra* 44) in the unfixed islands of Perelandra. He also notices "the wood with trees as vertical as towers" (*Perelandra* 46). Even in his solitude he is conscious to his peculiar environment. This is because he values the inherent worth of the nonhuman world.

In *Perelandra* the natural world of trees and their fruits appear as man's ally and sustenance provider. When Ransom finds some globes of yellow fruit hanging in clusters from a tree, he picks one and then is inclined to pick another fruit and repeat

the pleasure although his hunger had been appeased. But his eco-sensitive mind resolves not to taste it again. His strong ecological bond consents him to take from nature only so much as to satisfy his hunger for the moment. He recollects now, that on earth, "he had reiterated pleasures not through desire, but in the teeth of desire and in obedience to a spurious rationalism" (*Perelandra* 47) but this is not so in *Perelandra*. Thus Ransom gains awareness that here in *Perelandra* one is restrained from grabbing more than one needs, while on Earth, he would have coveted more. This kind of ethics echoes Lewis's belief in man's ecological responsibility.

A remarkable phase of eco-consciousness is the eco-relationship which is proposed to be potential in Ransom's interaction with animals in the planet of *Perelandra*. He ventures to speak to a reptile but obtains no response. He initiates a relationship with this animal-creature of another planet by stroking its head and kneading its body and thereby his "acquaintance with the dragon prospered exceedingly" (*Perelandra* 54). Solitary and friendless, Ransom initiates a gentle and genuine relationship with this animal-creature of another planet:

He decided that he had better try and make friends with it. He stroked the hard dry head, but the creature took no notice. Then his hand passed lower down and found softer surface . . . that was where it liked being tickled. It grunted and shot out a long cylindrical slate-coloured tongue to lick him. It rolled round on its back revealing an almost white belly, which Ransom kneaded with his toes. His acquaintance with the dragon prospered exceedingly. (*Perelandra* 54)

Lewis shows an amicable relation of man with the animals which is in accordance with the ethics of nature such as "seeing animals without hurting them; seeing them in their contexts; teaching about animals; advocating respect for them; and finally knowing them, richly" (Malamud 59). In fact, Ransom is seen respecting and trying to know the animal deeply. He associates with the animal and is contented to remain with it in the floating paradise.

The woman named Tinidril who belongs to *Perelandra* has a remarkable bond with the nonhuman world. Ransom is astonished to see her

sitting amidst the throng of pigeon-coloured birds, flame-coloured birds, beaver-like creatures and dolphin-like fishes. Quite surprisingly, Ransom sees the creatures:

They surrounded her ten or twenty deep, all facing her . . . birds were in long lines and more of them seemed to be alighting on the island every moment and joining these lines. From a wood of bubble-trees behind her half a dozen creatures . . . were waddling up to join the assembly. Tiny frog-like beasts . . . kept leaping about her, sometimes higher than her head, sometimes alighting on her shoulders. . . . Amidst all this she stood. . . . (*Perelandra* 61)

All the animals greeted the lady and she too reciprocated their gesture by welcoming them. However, such instances can never be experienced on earth. It is evident that as Tinidril sensitive towards her co-creatures she is able to comprehend and associate with the animals. Animals of *Perelandra* also feel happy to be related with her. This is obvious as the animals often surround her and the birds perch on her shoulders.

Lewis presents *Perelandra* as a flawless planet where animals are loved, cared and adored. Unfortunately, an evil-minded man named Weston comes to this peaceful place of *Perelandra*. As he is insensitive to life-forms he is blind to the nuances of the natural world. In his aversion towards animals he heartlessly kills and throws away many animals without even feeling a sense of remorse. Moreover, Ransom witnesses the pathetic sight:

A trail of mutilated frogs lay along the edge of the island. Picking his footsteps with care, he followed . . . counted ten, fifteen, twenty : and the twenty-first brought him to a place where the wood came down to the water's edge. He went into the wood and came out on the other side. There he stopped dead and stared. Weston . . . was tearing a frog – quietly and almost surgically. . . . Then he finished the operation, threw the bleeding ruin away. (*Perelandra* 124)

This reveals how the frog is being ripped open, its hind legs had been torn off and it was so damaged that the helpless frog finds it difficult to leap. Such an act of deliberate killing of animals exposes Weston's insensitivity towards the nonhuman

creatures. However, as Ransom is eco-sensitive, he finds it unbearable and states that it is "an intolerable obscenity" (*Perelandra* 123). He rescues many frogs from the clutches of heartless Weston. A great deal of "his time was spent in protecting the animals from it. . . . Ransom tried whenever possible to get between it and its victim" (*Perelandra* 146). This shows how he interrupts and tries to save the animals and birds from the hostile hands of Weston. Thus, it is evident that as Ransom is sensitive towards nature he actively involves himself in the protection of the animals.

Ransom's eco-conscious mind evidently makes him respectful of all species whereby he commits himself to shield *Perelandra* from destruction. Weston, an evil-minded man, is determined to shatter the harmony of this noble place of *Perelandra*. His task is to tempt the lady Tinidrilso that she would disobey Maleldil, the god of *Perelandra* and thus bring in disharmony between man and the nonhuman world. Ransom tries to dissuade Weston from tempting her. Though he requests him to repent from his inhuman activities Weston refuses to pay attention. In order to safeguard the harmonious relationship of the natural world of *Perelandra* Ransom who is sensitive towards nature, fights and overpowers Weston. This combat between good and evil is fought for the purpose of protecting *Perelandra* and maintain its balanced ecological relationship established between man and nature.

Lewis professes a harmonious connection between man and the nonhuman world. It is evident that man's sense of admiration and attachment for the environment results in love and concern for it. When there is an emotional attachment towards the natural environment man will seek to care and show concern for it. It is substantiated that in order to cherish the harmonious relationship of the natural world one ought to be nature-conscious.

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