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A POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF ROMESH GUNESEKERA'S NOVEL *REEF*

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Abstract: The ever mutating sphere of literary criticism gets updated with innovative ideologies which open up spaces for further analysis of the existing theories in a different light with reference to the newly emerging ones. Postcolonial Ecocriticism is such a field of study incorporating both the subject matters of the two distinct areas of study: Postcolonialism, which is the reclaiming and relocating the past of the colonies and Ecocriticism that propagates an analysis of the role and portrayal of nature in literary genres. Postcolonialism being anthropocentric in its inclination appears to study only the crisis and issues related to culture and human beings which deviates from accepting nature as a significant phenomenon. But the essence of Nature is undeniable in the process of formation of a distinct culture or a society. It is even overlooked that the nature also undergoes colonization simultaneously with the colonization of a country. Ecocriticism from a postcolonial perspective directly advocates the idea that nature must be regarded as a whole entity including man, living and non living organisms, culture, and society and so on. Moreover, it argues that nature is facing threats due to industrialization, population blast, global warming and human greed for more satisfaction and comfort through material means resulting in the endangerment of the 'wilderness' of nature. Consequently, sustainability must be our lone concern while performing any act upon the nature. *Reef* by the Sri Lanka born author Romesh Gunesekera is a pleasing narrative centered on the story of Triton, a servant to a marine biologist Mr. Salgado. The marine ecosystem in its depleting form remains the principle concern of research to Mr. Salgado beyond which the political upheavals caused by traumatic eventfulness led to a bitter catastrophic experience in the country. This paper attempts to analyze the novel from a postcolonial ecocritical point of view imbibing the diasporic disposition.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism, Nature, Marine ecosystem, Diaspora etc.

Introduction:

The merging of two interdisciplinary ideas results from the functioning of the underlying connotations mutually inherent in them, a study of which makes possible a sound research inclined towards exhilarating an invincible sway in the theoretical ground. Contemporary literary scenario is eye witnessing such practices which contribute towards the gradual protruding of its circumference. Postcolonial ecocriticism is such a new arrival that unites post colonialism and ecocriticism, two different areas of study recently developed around 1970s and 1990s. It is the 'second wave' of ecocriticism as observed by Lawrence Buell in his *The Future of Environmental Criticism* which is determined to push the parameters of conventional ecocriticism as largely focused on American and British nature writing. It is interested in rural and urban natures, and concerned with issues of race, class, gender and environmental justice. Ecocriticism as Cheryll Glotfelty states:

“...is the study of the 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 modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literature studies” (Glottfelty and Fromon 8-10).

Nature is very significant in determining and shaping the human societal structure and culture which is though not recognized, can't be ignored as well. Nature, in its different appearances mesmerizes thrills, horrifies as well as pacifies the human soul. The irony occurs when the same humans destroy nature; treat it as subservient and to be something that exists only for their utility. Ecocriticism takes these into account and “conducts with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on the environment by human activities” (Abrams and Harpham 96). Nature is independent but it can't liberate itself from the all pervading transformation that the culture and society undergoes as they are inseparably linked with one another as the notable classical theorist said:

“You can drive out nature with a pitchfork but she keeps on coming back” (Horace l.x.24).

Therefore, it is inevitable to see that when a place is colonized the existing natural landscape also gets colonized though it is relegated to the backstage while recording the sinister effect of colonization. Postcolonialism as a broad concept concentrates chiefly on reclaiming and relocating the past, especially the cultural and societal past of the colonies before the strategic intrusion. Being anthropocentric, it escapes from analyzing the ravages done on the natural elements, excludes living and nonliving things out of its crux. It projects to look at the writings with an attempt to retell and restructure the content, thus erecting the path for self glorification. The postcolonial ecocritical study advocates the necessity of bringing postcolonial and ecocritical issues together as a means of challenging the imperialist mode of social and environmental dominance which directly argues that nature must be regarded as a whole entity and that the study of the suffering of the environment is a must requirement of the time on the face of the severe impacts of industrialization, globalization and so on for creating a realization as the ecocritic Vandana Shiva states that ‘we are not Atlas carrying the world on our shoulder. It is good to remember that the planet is carrying us’.

Statement of the problem:

The continuing effect of imperialism is observed in various forms: physical, moral, technical, psychological and so on in the countries after decolonization. The people of such land are unable to do away with the imperial experience as they find themselves trapped in between the newly constructed means of exploitation like development, welfare and so on. This paper attempts to make a textual analysis of the novel *Reef* in order to find out how the novelist has addressed the issue of the depleting marine ecology simultaneously with the collapsing of the nation set in the backdrop of the postcolonial Sri Lanka.

Textual Analysis:

The novel was first published in the year 1994, while Sri Lanka got independence in 1948. Set in the postcolonial time, the novel is also a diasporic representation from the perspective of a dispersed Sri Lankan citizen, Triton who after the political upheaval shifted to London and settled there down. The narrative is tailored with a flashback technique, thus travelling down the memory lane, the narrator opens up the book of his past life in a land before separation. All the characters in the novel have enlivened their life in the narration of Triton. The natural setting of his owner's big house is relived by him through his memory and the readers feel the same comfort as the narrator once felt amidst the fresh air in the beach-

“...the two columns at the front of the house plunged into beds of scarlet rathmal and white jasmine. The big bay between them, and the front windows, was shielded by cane tats painted in mildewy green...” (Gunsekera 5).

Staying in a foreign land is incorporated with a series of emotional attachments for the homeland and the emotion knows no bound when someone from the homeland is got to meet in the foreign soil. Triton met a man from Sri Lanka in a gas station from whose words we are introduced to the unrest prevailing in Sri Lankan land. “Very bad war back there” is the set of words directly pointing the chaos, disharmony and restlessness that has remained the true face of the postcolonial political scenario of Sri Lanka. References can be made to the Sri Lankan history of civil war to well describe the fate of these people even after so many years of independence-

“...this country will end up like a bloody banana republic. Old Bandaranaike? Now his assassination was a real first” (135).

Triton remembers the old housemaid who told him about her homeland to turn “from village to jungle and back to village, time and again, over her seventy-odd years” (15) which symbolically triggers towards the devastating impact of war, revolt and power politics. Triton is a servant to a marine biologist whose very first task is to provide his master a cup of tea and look after each and everything as he progresses as a servant. But towards the end of the novel we can see Triton to become self reliant and to deny to serve others anymore which metaphorically can mean the deconstruction of the master-slave binary which is another important area of study in postcolonialism.

The marine biologist Mr. Salgado is a self educated man. He is very sincere towards the study of the marine ecology:

“He studied mosquitoes, swamps, sea corals and the whole bloated universe, and right from the early days wrote long articles about all of them. He wrote about the legions under the sea, the transformation of water into rock- the cycle of light, plankton, coral and limestone- the yield of beach to ocean”(24).

He is devoted towards the study of the coral reefs, their nature and growth which create the foundation for the whole marine ecology. They can be found in countless of numbers in the sea as Salgado says- "...nobody can count how many polypifers surround us in the sea" (24). He is seen always to be excited about these reefs and rich with knowledge about their existence underwater when he proposed Nili to dive deep and show "...a fabulous world. Fabulous. I'll show you the fish, the corals..." (109). These reefs are so delicate and their growth is so slow- "...this polyp is really very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the immediate environment could kill it..." (48). Thus reefs are parts of the omnipresent nature which provide shelter to thousands of fish and insect species found under water for which it needs careful preservation because "...if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in. The sand will go. The beach will disappear" (48). The skin is the only surviving thing of a reef which is 'immortal' and 'self-renewing'. Surveys are done and reports are made on these reefs but not the real issue is highlighted just as Salgado says :

"...surveys have been done since the 1880s, but I don't think they have any real understanding of what is happening. Coral grows about as fast as your fingernails, but how fast is it disappearing? Nobody knows!" (48).

They are vulnerable creatures because their destruction is disproportionate to their growth and anything like 'bombing, mining, and netting- even if you pee on the reef' can kill them. Thus, the advanced technological aids used in the development works or in fishing or any harsh human action can cause threat to the reefs. Salgado is very much aware of these threats as he exclaims sadly regarding the outlook of the people- "I know. People think they can rule even the waves by decree" (163). His research helps him to find out means to safeguard the reefs as he expresses - "if only we could make the whole coast like Yala. A sea sanctuary, with not a soul there. A real refuge" (161). His friends suggest him to popularize his research and practically do something for the protection of the reefs by being a part of the government. Many groups of people with different interests and even the government agencies come with huge plans to preserve the reefs but all trials remain in vain due to their lack of proper concern. It is observed that "if this thing becomes anything, some political bigwig will want his fat hands on it" (48). But Salgado is least prepared to assist the government or to publicly take a stand for the preservation of the reefs. He doesn't want to be controlled by any authority and to be busy in 'asking for favors and doing favours' which is criticized by his friends as they say- "Sometimes Ranjan, you think too bloody much for your own good" (49).

We see no attention in the authorities' part either to preserve the polyps or to just know about its nature, rather there are crisis between the governing party and the opposition party for the power equation. The seas for them appear to be a means for the legitimization of their developmental policies in order to gain public support and sympathy. They acquire the role of the exploiters who out of nowhere are surrounded by a longing to utilize the inland seas for irrigation-

"Meanwhile a nationwide concern for *inland* seas grew as politicians invoked the spurious visions of ancient kings. All our engineers, trained in London and New England, suddenly saw great advantages in reviving the traditional skills of irrigation..." (119).

Here, the engineers are educated in the foreign land of the colonizers and are utilizing the acquired knowledge to exploit the natural heritage of their own country of course, with an aim to extort benefits. Thus, imperialism is encouraged by the members of the once colonized land through a shift in roles which perhaps is a result of the 'strategic altruism' conducted by the colonizers. There is also a voice of revolt against these in the form of Wijetunga, an assistant to Mr. Salgado who utters-

"Tourists? These people all think tourists will be our salvation. All they see is pockets full of foreign money... they will ruin us... our country needs to be cleansed, radically... *we have to destroy in order to create...* like the sea. Whatever it destroys, it uses to grow something better"(111).

Conclusion:

Thus, the sea means everything for the people of this land. Their emotions are pacified, strategies are executed, and logic is accepted under this inclusive idea of the 'sea'. The welfare proposals introduced as a part of the governmental programs or the ways of revolt in the form of bombing, gunfire etc. are directly responsible for the deterioration of the marine ecology which is foregrounded by the author through this text. The 'wilderness' in the sea is threatened and the novel shows no instance of restoration of the same. Rather the author is successfully trying to create awareness among the readers about the impact of imperial effect executing silently in the decolonized countries in the guise of development and welfare. The reference to the political devastation taking place in the Sri Lankan marine landscape is evident of the fact that the harmony in the existing nature is disoriented as the author documents that 'Back in April, in 1971, the first of the insurgencies erupted in a frenzy of gunfire and small explosions. Thousands were killed in the reprisals. The heart of a generation was forever cauterized' (172). Mr. Salgado regrets of not doing anything for the sake of preserving the coral reefs. He pacifies himself by saying that studying about the reef was only a kind of 'obsession' in his early days which resulted in nothing. The same obsession is now shared by huge number of people who organize different events like symposium on 'Man and Coral' but "they are only concerned with the how, not the why" (176) as observed by Salgado, which has brought no good for the reef as well as for the inhabitants there in the consequence. Threats are posed to both the nature and the human population equally, thus deconstructing the idea of nature as subservient to human as provoked by Salgado through his utterance:

"The earth has spun with its real stars under a beautiful blue robe ever since the beginning of time. Now as the coral disappears, there will be nothing but sea and we will all return to it"(172).

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