

Harmony Unveiled: Exploring Ecocentrism, Imaginary Homelands, and Green Myth in Sarojini Naidu's "Summerwoods"

Dr. Shiney Sarah Lionel W., Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli

Abstract

This research paper delves into the intricate relationship between humans and nature by analysing Sarojini Naidu's poem "Summerwoods." Through the lenses of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, the paper examines how the poem navigates the spectrum between these two worldviews. Naidu's portrayal of an imaginary homeland, rich with natural beauty, evokes an ecocentric perspective. This perspective is reinforced by ecopoetic techniques, which vividly depict the interconnectedness of nature and its emotional resonance. The poem also integrates the myth of Krishna and Radha, metaphorically addressing the discord between humans and nature due to material desires. The concept of a green myth adds another layer, contextualizing the mythological elements within an ecocentric framework. Ultimately, the paper concludes that "Summerwoods" beautifully blurs the lines between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, showcasing the potential for humans to reconnect with nature while acknowledging the challenges posed by materialism.

Keywords: ecocentrism, anthropocentrism, imaginary homeland, green myth, ecopoetics, literary ecology, nature-human relationship, interconnectedness, materialism.

Introduction

Literature is a prism that reflects the complex relationship between humans and nature. Just as it is impossible to name a Shakespearean tragedy without its topographical setting, so too is every literary work of art intertwined with the natural world. This is why geography and ecology are often uninvited guests in literature. In the 1980s, the study of the ecosystem in literary works gained prominence. This field of study, now known as ecocriticism, was pioneered by literary critics such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Laurene Coupe. In her groundbreaking text, *Eco Criticism Reader*, Glotfelty defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 18). Ecocritics examine how literature represents the natural world, and how it can be used to promote environmental awareness. Ecocriticism is a complex field, one way to think about ecocriticism is as a magnet with two poles: anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. The poem "Summerwoods" by Sarojini Naidu is a perfect example of this, as it explores the relationship between humans and nature in a lush and evocative way. Here, the reader can explore the possibilities of green studies through the lens of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. To make the study more precise, it is mandatory to understand the ideas of both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism.

The Roots of Anthropocentrism: Tracing its Origin and Environmental Impact

Anthropocentrism is a worldview that places humans at the centre of the universe. It is derived from the Greek words 'anthropos' meaning 'human' and 'kentron' meaning

‘centre.’ The term ‘anthropocentrism’ was first used in the context of environmental ethics by Lynn White in his essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” In the essay, White argued that the Christian creation story is the root cause of the ecological crisis which tells us that humans are the pinnacle of God’s creation and have dominion over nature. This ideology gives humans the right to exploit nature for their own purposes, without regard for the consequences:

We would seem to be headed toward conclusions unpalatable to many Christians. Since both science and technology are blessed words in our contemporary vocabulary, some may be happy at the notions, first, that viewed historically, modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and, second, that modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man’s transcendence of, and rightful master over, nature. But, as we now recognize, somewhat over a century ago science and technology--hitherto quite separate activities--joined to give mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecologic effects, are out of control. If so, Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt. (12)

Ecocentrism in Literary Discourse: Unveiling Nature’s Central Role in Literature

The term ‘ecocentrism’ in literature was not coined by a single person. It is a relatively new term, and it has been used in a variety of ways by different scholars. The word ‘ecocentrism’ is derived from the Greek words ‘oikos’ meaning ‘house’ and ‘kentron’ meaning ‘center.’ It literally means ‘house-centered’ or ‘nature-centered.’ In 1972, Joseph Meeker used the term ecocentrism in his book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. Meeker used this term to refer to a literary approach that focuses on the relationship between humans and the natural world. He believed that ecocentric literature can help humans to develop a more sustainable and ethical relationship with nature.

Escaping Anthropocentrism: The Ecocentric Imaginary Homeland in Sarojini Naidu’s “Summerwoods”

The poet opened the poem with a slight hatred of the human-centred lifestyle by calling it a stifling strife, “O I am tired of painted roofs and soft and silken floors...” From the first few lines of the poem, it is evident that the poet’s yardstick was not equal to both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. As the poem progresses, the idea of ecocentrism overtakes anthropocentrism. Though there is scarcely any room for anthropocentrism in the poem, a deep understanding of anthropocentrism helps to understand its binary opposite in a more nuanced way. Anthropocentrism is the belief that humans are the central and most important species on Earth. This view is often reflected in literature, where humans are typically the main characters and the natural world is often portrayed as a backdrop for human action.

Anthropocentrism can lead to a disregard for the environment, as humans are seen as having the right to exploit nature for their own benefit. In the beginning of human existence, before the development of modern civilization, humans lived in close harmony with nature. They

used natural materials to build their shelters and tools, and they focused on meeting their basic needs rather than on luxury. However, this approach began to change with the development of modern civilization. As humans invented new technologies and machines, they became more and more detached from nature. They began to focus on their own needs and desires, and they often disregarded the impact their actions had on the environment. This anthropocentric society made the poet hate her present elegant lifestyle, which was occupied by furnished floors and walls. The entire poem progresses towards escaping from the anthropocentric world to an ecocentric world, which is filled with Gulmohurs and Cassia woods. This typical Indian garden setting may have been experienced by Naidu in the past or may be something she wishes to see in the future. This escaping tendency of the poet from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism can be decoded with Salman Rushdie's concept of "Imaginary Homeland." In his essay "Imaginary Homelands" Salman Rushdie discusses the concept of diasporic displacement. He argues that the world we live in today is no longer a native place for any particular race, as people have been displaced due to industrialization, violence, and economic aspiration. This has disrupted the idea of nativism, or the belief that a person belongs to a particular place.

Rushdie also argues that even if we are not physically displaced, we are all dislocated in time from the glorious national past that we might want to go back to. This is because our memories of the past are always filtered through our present experiences. In this poem, Naidu yearns for a typical Indian semi-forest setting, which she may have seen once or still remembers in her mind. This imaginary homeland is filled with medicinal plants and trees, such as tamarind, molsari, and neem, which can heal her and her beloved from the wounds caused by the modern world. It is also filled with birds, such as koel, and beautiful hills and valleys. Naidu's aspiration for this imaginary homeland is not simply a desire to escape the modern world. It is also a desire to reconnect with nature. In this imaginary homeland, there is no need for anthropocentric furniture or technology. Humans are simply one part of a larger ecosystem.

The concept of imaginary homelands can help the readers to understand the experiences of people who have been displaced, either physically or mentally. It helps to imagine a better world, one that is more in tune with nature. The poet's imaginary homeland is a place where she can achieve a physical and mental union with her beloved. This is because the homeland is in a state of equilibrium with all the natural resources. Every species that depends on nature can survive in this homeland, just as the poet and her beloved can survive together. The homeland is also eco-friendly, with space for every species to thrive. The poet mentions golden panthers, water lilies, and other natural things in the poem, which shows that she believes that everything in the world deserves equal respect. Here, the humans are not the only important species. All living things are interconnected and interdependent, and they all have a role to play in the ecosystem. The poet's imaginary homeland is a place where humans can learn to live in harmony with nature, and where everyone can find peace and happiness.

Greenmyth and Ecopoetics: Unveiling Nature's Story in Sarojini Naidu's "Summerwoods"

The ecocentric imaginary homeland of Sarojini Naidu is palpable to even the most casual reader, despite the poem's romantic setting. This is largely due to the poet's use of eco-poetic techniques.

Eco-poetics is a field of study that examines how literature represents the natural world. Scholars of eco-poetics explore how language is used to depict nature, and how literature can be used to raise awareness of environmental issues. In "Summerwoods," Naidu uses a variety of eco-poetic techniques to create a vivid and immersive portrait of her ecocentric homeland. She uses specific imagery to evoke the sights, sounds, and smells of the forest. She also uses metaphor and simile to compare the forest to a living being, emphasizing its interconnectedness and interdependence.

The eco-poetical description in the poem "Summerwoods" shifts the poem's focus towards ecocentrism, making it a green-study piece with a typical Indian setting. The poet's use of mythical characters such as Krishna and Radha, who are known for their eternal love in Indian mythology, further enhances its eco-poetic quality. Krishna and Radha are mythical figures who were once in love, but they were unable to be together due to external factors. This parallels the human relationship with nature, as humans often love nature but are unable to fully connect with it due to their desire for material wellness. The poet's representation of nature through the lens of a native mythic story can be studied through a new lens called 'greenmyth.' Lady Raglan, an English folklorist and anthropologist, coined the term 'greenmythology' in her 1939 article "The Green Man in Church Architecture" in the journal *Folklore*. In the article, Raglan argues that the Green Man is a pagan fertility deity who was incorporated into Christian symbolism during the Middle Ages. She also suggests that the Green Man may be related to other mythological figures such as the Celtic god Cernunnos and the Norse god Odin.

The term 'greenmythology' has since been used to refer to the study of all aspects of the Green Man, including his history, symbolism, and cultural significance. In "Summerwoods," Naidu uses the myth of Krishna and Radha to explore the human relationship with nature. She shows how humans can love nature deeply, but they are often unable to fully connect with it due to external factors.

Conclusion

The conceptual analysis of the poem through the lenses of imaginary homeland, eco-poetics, and green myth reveals that the poem is an ecocentric piece of art. This is because the poem blurs anthropocentrism and highlights ecocentrism. The combination of these three concepts in the poem creates a work of art that is both ecocentric and anthropocentric. The speaker's desire for an imaginary homeland that is in harmony with nature is ecocentric, but the poem's use of the Krishna and Radha myth also highlights the importance of human relationships with nature. In this way, the poem blurs anthropocentrism and highlights ecocentrism. It shows that humans can have a deep connection with nature, but that this connection can be disrupted by materialism.

References

Adkins, A.W.H. and Pollard, John Richard Thornhill. "Greek mythology." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 26 Apr. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-mythology>. Accessed 18

"Eco-poetics." PoetryFoundation, poetryfoundation.org/articles/25466/ecopoetry. Accessed 17

Aug. 2023.

Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Naidu, Sarojini. "Summer Woods." *Eden*, edited by Dr. R. Ananthan, Anu Chithra Publications, 2021, p. 26.

Rushdie, Salman. "Imaginary Homelands." *The London Review of Books*, vol. 4, no. 18, 7 Oct. 1982, pp. 11-16. www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v04/n18/salman-rushdie/imaginary-homelands.

White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *Center for the Study of Complex Systems, Carnegie Mellon University*, 1967, www.cmu.edu/faculty/gmatties/lynnwhiterootsofcrisis.pdf. August 2023.