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ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *SLOW VIOLENCE AND THE ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE POOR* BY ROB NIXON

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to seek the ecocritical perspectives as portrayed in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* by literary theorist Rob Nixon. Nixon depicts the threats and changes that brought to the environment which are difficult to discern. He proposes the problems and difficulties via attention to the phenomenological structure of social problems. He explains the great threat of the environment to human society as well as the mother earth. He shows the violence brought by climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, oil spills, and the environmental aftermath of war takes place gradually and often invisibly. Nixon focuses on the dire consequences we have paid to the attritional lethality of many environmental crises. He explains how the misuse of natural resources which led to the violence and exploitation. The different circumstances just as the fossil fuel, war and ecological disaster are led the environment to drought and desertification. As a result, a new theory is aroused called Ecocriticism. It is a worldwide emergent movement which came into existence as a reaction to man's anthropocentric attitude of dominating nature. Ecocriticism represents a major tool of analyzing nature writing which is commonly associated with environmental criticism.

Keywords: *Circumstances, Ecocriticism, Environment, Slow Violence and The Environmentalism of the Poor, Violence.*

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

What is Ecocriticism?

Ecocriticism means the study of literature and environment. It focuses how all sciences try to analyze the environment and find solutions for contemporary environmental problems. This theory has gained the attention of researchers and has proved itself to be an important field of investigation in literature. The famous works on this theory are published in the mid-1990s and edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination*, by Lawrence Buell. 'Ecocriticism seeks the relation between humans and the natural world in literature. It tackles the environmental issues and analyzed it. It focuses on individual's behaviour and their

relationship to nature and ecological aspects. Many researchers are put their attention and priority on environmental exploitation and increased technology. In late of twentieth century, the literary theories are concentrated the most important environmental problems such as the war, population explosion, the increased of technologies and pollution. (Mambrol. 2016)

Ecocriticism is a literary movement in ecological awareness which began particularly in America. It is defined by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) in the book of *'The Caring Our Environment Ecocritical Reader'* as "Ecocriticism is the relationship between literature and the physical environment". Glotfelty's approach is earth centered where she examines how human life is much more reflected by nature. Life without

environment and life without literature is almost impossible.

Ecocriticism includes all the ecological aspects, like living and non-living i.e. animals and birds as living aspects and river, mountain, plants, wilderness as non-living aspects, have been considered by several writers and poets in their literary works. This theory differs from other literary theories; it tackles the entire context of ecosphere which includes all human and non-human worlds.

Greg Garrard (2012) in 'Ecocriticism' defines Ecocriticism as a literary or cultural analysis of environmental issues, generally associated with green moral and a political agenda. Broadly defined, the subject of Ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human". (Garrard, p. 5) He presents the various concepts of the theory like Pollution, Wilderness, Apocalypse, Dwelling, Animals, The Earth, etc.

Previous Conducted Studies

R.Nimmi (2019) in *Ecocritical Analysis of Selected Short Stories of Ruskin Bond* analyses selected short stories by focusing not only on the theme of ecological chaos experienced by the humans but also the need for the family environment. M.Wang and Ch. Liu (2020) in *Reverence for Life, Back to Nature : An*

Ecocritical Study on Selected Short Stories of Alice Munro highlight the problems of the environment and suggesting the tentative solution based on the theory of Ecocriticism. They illustrated human exploitation of nature and the potential environmental problems. Furthermore, they search for the cause of ecological crisis. Enas Falih (2017) in *Protect the Environment from Destruction in Light of the Verses of the Quran* tackles the cause of environment problems in recent years, focusing on a large corruption by human being. She explains the importance of Holy Quran in the strengthening of environmental education by instructing Muslims and groomed behavior to preserve the environment. This study aims to examine the *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* by Rob Nixon depending on ecocriticism theory. It depicts the violence and destruction which wrought by environmental problems especially after the war..

Methodology of the Study

The main objective of this paper is to attempt an Ecocritical Analysis of *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* of Rob Nixon, by showing the deterioration and destruction of environment after the war. It examines the various concepts of the Ecocriticism theory and applies it in a novel.

- a. Presenting summary of the book, explanation of slow violence and the concepts of pollution and apocalypse with quotations
- b. Identifying the wilderness concept on victims of disasters, the Earth and Animals concepts.
- c. Conclusion part.

a. Presenting summary of the book, explanation of slow violence and the concepts of pollution and apocalypse with quotations

Rob Nixon (1954-) is a Professor in Humanities and the Environment at Princeton University, where he teaches creative nonfiction and environmental studies. His writing relies on environmentalism and on literature and culture from the global South. He focuses on environmentalism in relation to difficulties and struggles of environment justice. Nixon discusses in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) the violence, destruction and deterioration brought by different of the environmental changes aftermath of war. He indicates the environment and human beings are closely linked to each other and human beings are unable to separate themselves from it. Human beings are exploiting environment ruthlessly. Nixon rejects the environmentally and socially

disastrous decisions, such as America's ongoing use of imprecise cluster munitions in Afghanistan and Iraq. He intends to explain the violence effects on environment and poor people more than the rich and capitalism. He explains the slow violence as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). He emphasizes that slow violence is not easy to recognize unless specific attention is paid to it. The invisibility of slow violence is encouraging for those who apply it because of the inherent difficulty in distinguishing whether the act actually involves violence or not. It advances so slowly that it is not, by its nature, easily recognizable. Nixon confirms that "the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence" (Nixon, p.2) Nixon chooses the storytellers that have inspired an environmentalism of the poor, primarily in the global South such as Arundhati Roy, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Abdulrahman Munif, Indra Sinha and Jamaica Kincaid. They are all figures who, in Nixon's words, "are alive to the inhabited impact of corrosive transnational forces, including petro-imperialism, the mega-dam industry, out-sourced toxicity ... and the militarization of

commerce, forces that disproportionately jeopardize the livelihoods, prospects, and memory banks of the global poor.” (Naguib, 2007)

Pollution considers one of the major environment problems which require more analysis at cultural as well as scientific level. Actually man contributes in creating the impure surrounding. Environmentalists are concerned about global warming and pollution. They respect rural way of life, in the lap of nature, away from pollution of urban area. Although *Animal's People* is set twenty years after the disaster but it explains the event clearly and highlights the impacts of environmental terror:

The initial toxic event that kills thousands of people ; the fatal fire that erupts years later, the contaminants that continue to leach into the communal bloodstream; and the monsoon season that each year washes abandoned chemicals into the aquifers, poisoning wells and producing new cycles of deferred casualties. (Nixon, 2011, p. 61)

Nixon narrates different examples of violence to environment from the first one is pollution which is represented by the 1984 disaster at the Union Carbide factory in the Indian city of Bhopal. Out of toxic gas leaked out thousands of people were killed, and the pollution will continue to affect the inhabitants for decades. The

water surrounding the former factory site contained toxic chemicals and heavy metals. Nixon tries to highlight the impact of pollution and Maintaining a media focus on slow violence poses acute challenges, not only because it is spectacle deficient, but also because the fallout's impact may range from the cellular to the transnational and [...] may stretch beyond the horizon of imaginable time (Nixon, p. 47).

Apocalypse is another concept which means the destruction of the world. Since Lawrence Buell's (1995) 'explained that "apocalypse is the single most powerful metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (93). Hence, Ecocritics focus on the destruction of the earth and man's contribution for the reconstruction of nature in case of devastation

Nixon also explores the Chernobyl disaster of April 26, 1986, [which] was distinguished by an initial catastrophic security lapse followed by a series of time lapses. The initial catastrophe was spectacular but, in media terms, deferred: eighteen days passed before Mikhail Gorbachev appeared on TV to acknowledge the explosion (Nixon , p.48) He explains the Chernobyl disaster is an accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in the Soviet Union. It is

considered as the worst disaster in the history of nuclear power generation. He explains the world realized that it was witnessing a historic event. Nixon illustrates the impact of this explosion on environment and how the metric tons of uranium was now in the atmosphere and at least 28 people initially died as a result of this disaster, and more than 100 were injured. One of the effects of his accident is the thyroid cancer after being exposed to radiation from the incident.

In both countries whether India or Soviet, the pollution is coursed through air, water, soil, crops, meat, and also mother's milk. The slow violence is appeared most dramatically among children born a decade or more after the disaster struck.

Nixon focuses on "Abdelrahman Munif who has written *Cities of Salt*, between 1984 and 1989 tackled the broad geography and volatile history of the petroleum encounter. He highlights the deal between our planet's biggest petroleum players Saudi Arabia and the United States. *Cities of Salt* sets around the rise of the hydrocarbon despots which encouraged and sustained by American. The main subject of *Cities* is disillusionment of ordinary Bedouins .He explains the psychological and cultural disorientation of Bedouins whose lands and lives has crushed, distorted and

polluted. Munif shows the beauty of Wadi al-Uyoun saying:

Wadi al-Uyoun was an ordinary place to its inhabitants, and excited no strong emotions, for they were used to seeing the palm trees filling the wadi and the gushing brooks surging for thin the winter and early spring, and felt protected by some blessed power that made their lives easy. (Nixon, p.82)

Later he depicts the petroleum state as mark of the fall and the destruction of environment in Wadi . Now the people in wadi are homeless, they get displaced to a coastal refinery town, Harran, where they find themselves lived in metal shacks and most of them worked as laborers under foreign mastery. The police force is instructed to beat to death if necessary anyone who refuses to abandon their oil-rich oases.(Nixon, 2012)

Nixon assures on Munif's statement in "Cities of Salt," "means cities that offer no sustainable existence. When the waters come in, the first waves will dissolve the salt and reduce these great glass cities to dust. In antiquity, as you know, many cities simply disappeared. It is possible to foresee the downfall of cities that are inhuman. With no means of livelihood they won't survive."(Tariq Ali, 2004) Munif explains the failure of the Arab States to exploit their oil wealth and

develop and prosper their countries. He assures that Harran had been a city of fishermen and travelers coming home, but after the coming of American's workers it became different as ghost town; its people are featureless. It has become a city of humanity of assemblage of languages, accents, colors and religions but in fact it lacks life, activity and vitality. (Munif, 1987)

Munif rejects the immigration of people from their cities and clarifies the importance of house as he was fed by homelessness; he never possessed a conclusive homeland. He knows what it is meant leaving and travelling. He witnesses "Palestinian refugees into Jordan, the Nasserite revolution, the Suez Crisis, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the Lebanese civil war, Sabra and Shatila, the Iranian revolution, the intafadah, the Iran-Iraq War, the Persian Gulf War, and the 2003 Iraq War shortly before his death.(Nixon , 2012) He feels frustrated and disappointed when he sees the migration of Arab tribes due to American companies that come for searching the oil, which in fact most Arab countries do not benefit from it only migration and wars.

Nixon also highlights Hendrik Hertzberg's writing in the *New Yorker*, who tackled the issue of invasion of Iraq on March 2003. In his war, America has

used the smart bombs which exhibit a morally superior intelligence. Depending on the different strategies and smart weapons engage Iraq in a quick and a long-term killer which leaving behind landscapes of dragging death. Hertzberg declares:

[w]hatever else can be said about the war against the Iraqi dictatorship that began on March 19th, it cannot be said that the Anglo-American invaders have pursued anything remotely resembling a policy of killing civilians deliberately. And, so far, they have gone to great tactical and technological lengths to avoid doing it inadvertently. . . . What we do not yet know is whether a different intention, backed by technologies of precision, will produce a different political result . (Nixon, p. 130)

In fact, the war has a slow violence on Iraq's land, air, water, and health infrastructure. The pollution that brought by the military actions leads to the phenomenon of desertification. The impact of war has receded into memory and often continues through its active residues for different generations.

Nixon notifies that the slow violence disproportionately harms poor people assuring that "people lacking resources ... are the principal casualties of slow violence" (Nixon, p. 4). He explains

the effects of the explosion of Carbide factory, the rural ethnic minorities in Nigeria; the rural Iraqis living with toxic war wreckage negatively impact on populations largely. The lack of resource is amplified by the marginality of populations. Those people struggle to get the attention and support they need.

Nixon highlights the effects of war by explaining how the Gulf War 1991 polluted the environment in which a lot of uranium munitions are deployed on a large scale. Gulf war has killed humans, animals and plants just like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It has depleted uranium which enters the environment; American troops fired weapons containing 340 tons of uranium. Paul Virilio describes it as:

With modern techniques and new logistics of perception, the battlefield of the Gulf War also developed within the field of perception. It appeared to be a local war, in the sense that its battlefield was very small compared with the Second World War. However, considering its representation, it was a worldwide war. . . . So, on one hand, *there was a local war of small interest, with very little human loss on one side, with very little consequences*, but on the other hand, there was a unique field of perception operating. Unlike the Vietnam War, it was a worldwide war; live, with all the special effects of course,

the data processing supervised by the Pentagon. . . . So, yes, this war happened, more on a screen than on the ground. *It happened more on the TV screen than in the reality of the battlefield.* To that extent, one can say that real time defeated real space. (Virilio. P. 2001, P. 64)

Nixon presents Saro-Wiwa as a member of Ogoni who produced tireless testaments to the devastation of his culture by the oil-driven avarice of vast forces beyond its control. As a writer he tackles the issue of the ecological war against the Ogoni. He depicts the role of Shell, Chevron, and the other oil companies in providing Nigerian military with boats and helicopters to stop protestors. The Nigerian military are killed 2,000 Ogoni through direct murder and the burning of villages. One person is witnessed s the explosion near the Ogoni village, he describes it as :

An ocean of crude oil moving swiftly like a great river in flood, successfully swallowing up anything that comes its way. Cassava farms, yams, palms, streams, and animals for miles on end. There is no pipe borne water and yet the streams, the only source of drinking water are coated with oil. You cannot collect a bucket of rain water for the roofs; trees and grass are all covered with oil. . . . Men and women forced by hunger have to dive deep in oil

to uproot already rotten yams and cassava.(Wiwa, 1992, p.58)

As a result, the air is fouled by the flaring of natural gas, and their water is poisoned. Furthermore, the foreign companies continue to tamper into the environment and interfere in bodies of the local farming community. Another person is witnessed the disaster he says: In the words of a second witness: "We can no longer breathe natural oxygen; rather we inhale lethal and ghastly gases. Our water can no longer be drunk unless one wants to test the effect of crude oil on the body."(Wiwa, p.66)

B. Identifying the Wilderness Concept on Victims of Disasters, the Earth and Animals Concepts:

Wilderness is the second concept which refers to the absence of human life in it. It is depicted as a space the landscape of ultimate authenticity. It signifies human being with qualities of animal and the place as a situation uncontaminated by civilization. After the Chernobyl explosion, the Soviet authorities had mobilized thousands of Ukrainian coal miners to help them through paying the cost of treatment. One of them is Dmytro, who worked in it. In fact he portrayed his body's radiation which forces him to live as an alien, unnatural, and disquieting. The

Ukrainian body politic is remained environmentally and epidemiologically dominated by the "foreign burden". Through the slow violence of environmental catastrophe, Dmytro behaves not as human citizens, but as biorobots who destined for the scrap heap of expendable parts. Biorobots are exemplified the dissolution of the boundaries of their humanity.

Another one is Animal; he is an orphaned person who lost his parents in explosion. From the beginning, children at the orphanage called him animal out of his walking like an animal; he accepts the name because of his alienation and abasement. He knows that he's acting weird, but he's not an animal. The process converted animal into a figure who insists, "I've no choice but to be unnatural." (Nixon, p. 54). Animal insists on most important words for him saying: "all things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (Nixon, p. 58)

Another concept is **The Earth** which represents the future of human being. Dams have an important impact on the earth and environment. The environmental impacts of dams are positive and negative. The benefits are controlling stream regimes, consequently preventing floods, storing water and

generating energy, but the negative impacts are creating the possibilities of considerable harm for human being and all the living beings. Nixon focuses on Vandana Shiva who states: “[T]he water crisis is an ecological crisis with commercial causes but no market solutions . . . Ending the water crisis requires rejuvenating ecological democracy.” (Vandana Shiva, 2002) She notices in Ethiopia the dam work has begun on the Omo River, it takes advantage to the capital’s elite by providing them with electricity and graft, but the poor tribes are at risk. It will remain them in the dark. By building the dam, the river is narrowed and controlled from above; which two of those rocks will be removed. As a result, the people will suffer and starve. The dam will affect negatively on earth, living beings and environment. The story doesn’t end in Ethiopia but also in northern Kenya the Omo River drains into the largest lake, where tribes find supplement of life through fishing, cattle herding, agriculture, and hunting. The dam will prevent the inflow of fresh water and the lake will become salty which is unsuitable for humans, animals and plants.

Another concept of Ecocriticism theory is Animals which represent the core of environment. The abusive treatment and cruelty to animals mean the slavery towards nature. Man usually lives with

domestic animals and he has acquired even humanity living with them. In fact humans are being responsible for the extinction.

Nixon explores the era before Nelson Mandela’s election in 1994 which experienced a dark and cruel period against animals. South Africa is faced a white flight, one of ugly stories was a surge in Megafauna to sell lions, elephants, crocodiles, hippos, and sent it to market. Whites are emigrating and shutting down their circuses and private zoos. At the time, J. P. Kleinhans is a wildlife entrepreneur, who had converted his sheep farm into a hybrid space and shooting dangerous African animals that were in fact “canned lions,” circus retirees and putting out to the carnivore’s equivalent of pasture.(Nixon, 2011)In fact, Kleinhans encourages the racist issue, he has no blacks working in his farm depending on his wife and sons to complete his job. He creates a racial island that effects on psyche in a place lived scars of enclosure and expulsion.(Nixon, 2012)

CONCLUSION

Out of uncontrolled extreme population which is increased in air, water and soil; people, plants and animals have begun to be damaged from 1960s up today. There are different reasons that helped in increasing population such as the technological improvements, the

expansions in cities, wars, dams which disordered the natural balance. Nixon indicates the human beings should live in harmonious relationship with environment. He further adds the human beings should avoid ruthless exploitation of environment. He criticizes war and considers it as reason to environmental degradation, pollution and ecocide. He depicts war as a slow violence leads to exploitation of both human beings and environment. He emphasizes on alerting others to care about slow violence and other matters of dispersed harm that led to exploitation of environment. He assures on studying environmental issues and conservation.

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