

READING THE ECO-ETHICS IN LITERATURE: A CULTURAL PRAXIS

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Facing the Dilemma of ‘Progress’

While educating the human minds and grooming the human skills to enter into a practically productive and competitive world, today various academic disciplines seem to look for a holistic vision of human progress. Has our traditional notion of progress, firmly founded on the lasting faith in human ‘rationality’, so far held with great reverence, failed to yield expected results? Or the entire conception of human progress was actually a misconception, which finally proved an utterly misguided quest for a wrongly defined goal? Why, even after experiencing spectacular materialistic growth marked with innumerable technological innovations, today the world seems stuck in an unrelenting dilemma of correctly identifying ‘retrogression versus progression’ with regard to human civilisation? It requires a wholesome interpretation before one gives a convenient lopsided explanation either blaming the scientific advancement for its repercussions or cursing humanities for losing ethical ground. Science, being doomed to caricature the biblical great ‘deluge’ into a modern scientific reality, while soliciting a fair explanation of its trajectory, triggers a critical enquiry. Sciences’ engagement with the humanistic concerns like ethics and morality, indeed, brings out the importance of interactive epistemology of knowledge which is essentially required to understand the presently perceived paradox of ‘growth’. It is expected to find out rational and scientific solutions of certain humanitarian issues.

Towards an Interdisciplinary Understanding

Questioning the whole vision of human development, conceived in the earlier centuries and gradually concreted with the 19th century industrial revolution, today academic disciplines endeavour to trace out those overlooked elements that went missing in the partial visualization of ‘development’ with regard to human civilisation. At the juncture of an evolving interdisciplinary understanding, today knowledge seeks to bridge the gap in diversified disciplines for a holistic vision. It has been realised that the seemingly losing humanity befits the true idea of advancement when it meets both the ends of intellectual and emotional fulfilment. As the present academic dilemma suggests, one needs to dig out the factors responsible for the aggravation of initial enthusiasm and disillusionment, before lamenting on the failure of Dickensian ‘great expectations’ of an intellectually growing man.

The basic flaw in laying out the meaning of knowledge is rooted in omitting the balance while handling the dynamic force like ‘development’ which is at the same time biological, anthropological, ideological, socio-political, economic, cultural, and what not. The vital question brought into light by the multifarious nature of ‘development’ is what have been the fundamental errors in formulating the notion of progressive humanity? It needs to be analysed not only in terms of science but also from socio-cultural perspective that shaped the modern man. In fact, one may begin with the deconstruction of the very word ‘man’, which fails to represent the humanity at large. Exposing the soiled power politics inherent in the word itself, on account of its gender connotations, the process initiates with replacing the ‘man’ with ‘human’ to be used as a more appropriate

term with regard to its advanced status as a 'species'. Actually, in the enthusiastic pursuance of materialism, perhaps humankind failed to visualise the inherent dynamism in the very definition of 'human development' at its conceptual level. It is revealed in the fact that materialistic advancement witnessed over the years could not correspond to our zealous utopian images of a wonderful world.

Sustainable Development as an Epitome of Conceptual Equilibrium

After passing through the long metamorphic expedition of 'man' from primitive stone age to the cybernetic version of life, today the 21st century postmodernist 'human' deliberates over the 'paradox' of growth. With the humanity writ large, it is identified with the incongruity inherent in the definition of 'growth'. It, for the sake of ease, can be translated into a simplistic dictum, namely 'exploitation versus conservation'. Which out of the two given opposing methodological orientations represents the idea of 'growth'? What, in tangible term, could we substantially equate the human progress with? Is it the exploitation of resources to generate output or the creation and preservation of resources to enlarge the meaning of output?

No doubt, the notion of 'development' always executes at multiple levels, whether technological or humanistic, science or art, nature or culture, materialistic or spiritual and so on. It is always more dynamic than ever conceived in one single canonical construction or category of knowledge. The emerging conception of sustainable development is an affirmative shift in the direction of enhancing the meaning of human progression. It can be easily comprehended at fundamental level of human understanding. With its four constituent domains namely economic, ecological, political and cultural, the concept of sustainable development marks a move from inconsiderate to considerate planning. While catering to the essentialities of consumption, it keeps the need of future in view. In 1987, the United Nations released the Brundtland Report, which gave its one of the most widely recognised definitions, "Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." According to the same report, the above definition contains within it two key concepts:

- The concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs

As evident in the above definition, sustainable development, in its genealogical implication, matches the broader mode of human development in which resource use aims to meet present human needs while preserving the interest of future generation. Isn't it an ameliorative step that fulfils the essential criteria of human 'rationality'? The same 'rationality' which, in its diversified definitional formulation, frequently misidentified and consequently get distorted at the thin border line of the 'absolute' and 'relative' self interest. It is high time for each academic discipline to identify, irrespective of its subjective and objective obligations, the uncorrupted notion of 'rationality'. It emphasises to inculcate the approachable attitudinal balance in each disciplinary domain especially while exposed to its own dangerous presumptuous assumptions.

Decoding the Scientific Surveillance of Literary Hermeneutics

Literature as a repository of socio-cultural, political and ethical values and an artistic manifestation of their aesthetic principles becomes instrumental in shaping the human consciousness. Literary studies across national

and global cultures open a wide arena of socio-political, historical and cultural development of human ideas and ideologies which help us to understand the nature of human progress. Such extensive range of knowledge is a key to visualise the future mould of human society and develop a consciousness among humans to plead for humanity. It also develops acumen for contending in intellectual debates of social, political, moral and ethical nature sensitizing us towards the contemporary areas of conflict and human rights. These issues become a part and parcel of various literary and cultural discourses and unveil the ruptures in the established canons of knowledge.

Literary hermeneutics is a critical enquiry to expose assorted esoteric contentions which claim to be universal, in fact, presumptuous, truths. The postmodernist criticism's attempt to dislodge the modernist conception of 'development' is a diminutive example of literary theory's critical engagement with cultural praxis. It questions the very veracity of contemporary consumerist culture, the end result of modernist industrial development and its close ideological ally of capitalism. While questioning the foundational premise of capitalistic mode of production and distribution that underlie the gradual diffusion of local into a global panorama, it, at certain level, seems to challenge the authorial versions of 'altruistic' science. How 'selfless' the science or scientific discoveries have been in their production of cultural output since, ultimately science remains a tool for intellectual minds to play with. Notwithstanding the claim of science to be 'value free', its outcome indubitably affects the socio-cultural values of human society.

Located within the intellectual realm of logical surveillance, literary hermeneutics represent a critical mode of thinking which is always present to intervene in so called 'scientific' logistics. Can these logistics afford to be 'value free'? The interdisciplinary interface of science and humanities always intercede these logistics to purge of their self-righteousness. In fact, scientific rationality is bound to negotiate with the value based propositions of cultures. In the words of Robert J. Brulle:

Questions about preservation of the natural environment are not just technical questions; they are also about what defines the good and moral life, and about the essence and the meaning of our existence. Hence, these are not just academic or technical matters, to be settled in elite dialogues between experts. These are fundamental questions of defining what our human community is and how it should exist. (Brulle, 48)

The logic of sustainable development underscores the required interdisciplinary interface of science and literature to define the 'rationality' in more appropriate and broader term. It is sought not only at its execution, but even at the level of conception, before it is too late to offset the fatal repercussions of so called 'development'. Facing the contemporary reality of a heedless depletion no one can deny its importance. The mode of sustainable development requires a multidisciplinary approach which doesn't end up with simply developing eco-friendly techniques in research labs and their implementation in economic sphere but a cultural shift. The concept of sustainable development cannot be simply reduced to environmental politics. As Timothy Clark points out the exaggeration involved in the extraordinary language of 'green' technology in which, "buying a slightly less destructive make of car becomes 'saving the planet.'" (2) In her words:

For the most part, reform environmentalists advocate measures within the given terms of capitalist industrial society ('sustainable development', carbon offset schemes, conservation charities with glossy magazines, etc.) Environmental politics becomes essentially a matter of long-term prudence for human interests and quality of life, the protection of aesthetically attractive landscapes and their associated leisure pursuits. (Clark, 2)

It is, indeed, an incomplete version of the sustainable development. There is a need to rethink entire material and cultural bases of modern society. Along with the technological advancement, there is an urgency to protect the human sensitivity which is the essence of cultural sustainability, an integral constituent of the idea of sustainable development. To quote *The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (UNESCO, 2001), which elaborates this fourth and foremost dimension of sustainable development in the words:

... cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature... it becomes one of the roots of development understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence.

With such vision of 'development', it is important to understand the interdisciplinary lacing of knowledge, inherent in the concept of sustainable development. Now it is high time to decode the science of literary hermeneutics to blend the logical thinking of science with the ethical perspective of humanities. In fact, there is plenty of scope to go even further. Just think for a moment, is there any possibility, howsoever weak, for both science and humanities to free themselves from anthropocentric assumptions to transcend certain limitations? What is needed is to explore, how it works out at the theoretical level and then, how it could be made effective at the level of cultural praxis. The dimensions are infinite.

Literature and Eco-Ethics: Developing a Critical Paradigm

The concept of sustainable development begins with sensitivity towards the term 'eco' generally identified with the environment. Since it is the environmental surrounding that is responsible for the origin and evolution of various species including humankind, it appears self evident. In fact, the further pursuit of knowledge always falls back on its foundational source. It leads to the proposition how one can decipher the cultural diversity without understanding the nuances of bio-diversity. Accepting the fact, brings both culture studies and natural science into a single theoretical domain. It turns into an eco-ethical discourse, in which ecological standards are placed at the heart of literature. It opens an avenue for a new critical paradigm committed to a sincere deliberative enquiry.

Present literary and cultural discourses attempt to interpret this inseparable relationship between human and environment. The increasing degradation of environment and its serious repercussions seen on ecology has given birth to a new critical idiom in literary theory called 'ecocriticism'. The term has gained momentum over the last two decades and challenges the inherited modes of thought and analysis. Placing the vital environmental issues at the centre in the historic-cultural contexts, it illustrates a more eco-concerned reading of various literary texts. Originated chiefly as a critical response to the current capitalist industrial society, it enquires into the traditional definition of progressive humanity. It brings a range of questions into the ambit of literary and cultural debate. How do literary texts highlight the contemporary cultural challenges with certain vital environmental issues at the core? Does eco-literature probe into the ethical reasoning of human rationality? How does it bring out the inherent dangers of well accepted and popular growth models? Can it give a new dimension to eco-critical sensitivity for constructive ethical framework of contemporary relevance? Critical queries of such nature inaugurates the new era of interdisciplinary working of literature and science where researches of interdisciplinary nature may formulate new cultural praxis.

Green Reading of the Texts into English Classrooms

While using the prefix ‘eco’ in phrasing the term ‘eco-ethics’ for understanding the cultural dimension of sustainable development, one comes across multiple connotations. It implies a dualistic proposition. Since the bi-syllabic term ‘eco’ is germane to both ‘economics’ and ‘ecology’, it brings both economic and environmental forces to participate into the cultural discourse on a sustainable society. Literature explores the eco-critical concerns through a methodical reading of various texts. A close analysis of textual structures as well as thematic patterns, besides establishing a theoretical paradigm, initiates the transmutation of cultural consciousness. With the dynamics of relational delicacy in the backdrop of human liaison with the natural world, eco-critical reading of the texts attempts to manifest the layers of foundational sensibilities that may stir the growing concern for an ecological balance.

Literary works exhibit how an emotional and ideological stand in a text comes close to various eco-ethical formulations. Be it an eco feminist perception, or bio centric interpretation of surrounding, literary hermeneutics somewhere strikes the deepest chord of human sensibilities. Green reading of literary texts redefines the human civilisation in relation to natural environment not only from reformative, but also from radical, ecofeminist and biocentric stances. The world is viewed as an ecological region, in which textual fabrications and literary renderings turn out a conscious understanding of collective conscience. It indicates the expansion of an ‘inclusive’ ethics that rightly navigates across disciplines for a more effective and broad based cultural praxis.

From Theory to Praxis : Justifying the Means by Ends

Eco-ethics in literature drives the world towards the formulation and execution of integrated knowledge to be sought through promoting a wide ranged interdisciplinary debate. Having understood the interrelationship of various academic disciplines, these theoretical domains not only reviewed the traditional notion of development from a multidisciplinary perspective but later it is also left with various socio-political agencies to devise the means for the judicious fulfilment of a holistic vision. A useful articulation of the values and principles of sustainability can be found in the Earth Charter, which offers an integrated vision and definition of strong sustainability. The document, an ethical framework for a sustainable world, was developed over several years after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and was launched officially in 2000. The Charter derives its legitimacy from the participatory process through which it was drafted. Today, its use as an educational instrument and a policy tool is widely acclaimed and is driven towards the realisation of the goal of a sustainable society.

The United Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome Document also refers to the “interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars” of sustainable development as economic development, social development, and environmental protection which serves as a tripartite proposition for laying down the policy guidelines for various socio-political agencies. The proclamation and establishment of numerous sustainability standards and certification systems, such as increasing emphasis on organic culture, rainforest alliance, fair trade, UTZ certification illustrate the efforts made by policy makers to bring the development process back on the right track.

To be consistent with the UCLG move to make ‘culture’ the fourth domain of sustainability we need to explore the cultural dimensions of sustainable development in the form of eco-ethics. What would eco-ethics imply while placed in the holistic framework of development? Does it indicate to evolve a new ‘culture of

ethics' or an 'ethical culture' to meet the expectations of our holistic vision? Whatever it entails, it is indubitably concerned with the increasing 'acculturation' of nature. It implores to save the 'natural' element of nature within the cultural framework of human civilisation. The concept of sustainable development needs to deeply probe into its own intricacies before being shaped into cultural praxis. To quote Timothy W. Luke:

Nature is turning into 'Denature'. Much of the earth is a 'built environment', a 'planned habitat', or 'managed range' as pollution modifies atmospheric chemistry, urbanization restructures weather events, architecture encloses whole biomes in sprawling megacities, biotechnology reengineers the base codes of existing biomass. (Luke, 195)

Reading 'eco-ethics' is to decipher the 'denaturing' of nature. It is to emphasise the cultural shift for restraining the insensitive 'acculturation' of nature. It is to combine literary sensibilities with cultural practices replacing its egocentric and inconsiderate inhumanity with a sensitive and humane biocentrism.

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