



## **Environmental Concerns in Salman Rushdie**

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### **Introduction**

The present age is an age of experimentation and innovation in the fields of art and literature. It has witnessed the origin of a number of critical theories and a transformation from anthropocentrism to biocentrism in critical theory. All this has happened because both literature and literary criticism mirror the changes of contemporary times and the world has witnessed fast and dramatic changes over the past hundred years or so. The last century was a period of great upheavals in the social, economic, political and religious life of people around the world. “Science and technology made great ‘advances’, leaving a great impact on the world culture” (Bramwell 67). Certain discoveries of science like the evolutionary theory, quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity shook people’s faith in religion and old cultural values. Rapid economic growth, globalization, the spread of technology, consumerist culture and materialistic values brought about revolutionary changes in the mode of living.

The old rural mode of living gave place to urbanized living with all its complexities. The world witnessed two World Wars ignited by greed, hatred and lust for power. The process of colonization of the world by some western powers reached its climax, and later the colonized nations got freedom from the bonds of slavery. “Loss of faith in religion, the breakdown of old cultural values and the growth of materialistic culture created a sense of insecurity, doubt, rootlessness and disintegration of human identity” (Bramwell 80). Interest shifted from the outward to the inward. The inner complexities of the mind came into focus, leading to the discovery of the sub-conscious and the unconscious mind by Sigmund Freud. The problems of “...race, class, gender and of human identity emerged as some of the greatest problems of the

age” (Bate 97). But behind all these changes and problems, “...the most threatening problem that was all the time getting more and more menacing was that of environmental crisis” (Bate 108).

Further, these upheavals of the last century are reflected in arts and literature, first in the form of modernism and later in the form of postmodernism, and have led to the growth of a number of critical theories, the major being, psychoanalysis, feminist criticism, deconstruction, Marxist criticism, postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism. The traditional mode of writing i.e. realism was found insufficient to portray the complexities of contemporary reality. Realism and naturalism became things of the past. To depict this reality, the writers evolved new techniques like stream of consciousness, dadaism, expressionism, fantasy, fairy-tale, psychological realism and magical realism.

Freud’s researches gave birth to psychoanalytic criticism, further developed by critics like Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan. The theory is anthropocentric in nature. It focuses on the psychic lives of the characters and pays no regard to external environment. The ‘overt story’ is thought to hide a ‘covert story’ and the two must be disentangled to understand the real motives behind all actions. The theory aims at exploring the hidden repressed motives of characters or the author behind the story. The psychic context of the literary work is paid more attention to than its social or historical or environmental context. It thus privileges the individual psychic drama above anything else.

Modernism had its origin in the beginning of the 20th century and it remained in vogue for a few decades until it paved the way for postmodernism in the 1950s. Modernist writers like W.B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and James Joyce reflect the distemper of their age-man’s rootlessness, his neurosis and moral degradation. There is also in their writings nostalgia for the past world of faith in fixed values when there was peace, harmony and certainty in life. There is no ray of hope in modernist writings. There is only a sense of despair and hopelessness. If at all there is some hope of redemption offered by T. S. Eliot, it is very faint; it is dominated by a sense of despondency. This sense of hopelessness comes from the deep realization that there is no possibility of repairing to the old world when people had faith in cultural and religious values.

The modernist writings are chiefly anthropocentric. Their focus is human beings. But some eco-critics today have discovered in them ecological concerns as well in the shape of nostalgia for rural and primitive modes of living, as in the case of D. H. Lawrence. Eliot's poetry (though he was an anti-romantic) too is a strong condemnation of urbanocentric living of the 20th century. The urban centres of living are described as desert-like places and called wastelands. The spiritual barrenness of man is described in terms of imagery drawn from nature, as is found in the following lines of *The Waste Land*:

What are the roots that clutch,  
what branches grow Out of this stony rubbish?  
Son of man, You cannot say, or guess,  
for you know only A heap of broken images,  
where the sun beats, And the dead tree gives no shelter,  
The cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. (Eliot 63)

### **The Problem**

Postmodernism has severed man completely from nature. We can say that it is near total loss of ecological conscience. Postmodernism embodies all the tendencies of modernism, but with a different attitude. It does not convey any nostalgia for the past as modernism does. It mirrors the hybridity, multi-culturalism, displacement, globalization, consumerism, the industrial-economic-military matrix and urbanized living of the present times and also reflects the rootlessness of human identity in the midst of this environment. The world as a melting pot of different cultures is mirrored as such, with a tacit acceptance of the changes that are taking place and with a hope that something better might emerge out of them. In critical theory, such an ideology takes the shape of poststructuralism and deconstruction, a theory that emerged in France in the late 1960's from the writings of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. The world in this theory is regarded as a linguistic and social construct. The relationship between the text and



the context is that of approximation, fluidity and postponement and not of corresponding referentiality. Just as a word in a language has meaning with reference to other words, so a literary text has a meaning in reference to other texts and not in reference to its correspondence with some outside fixed reality.

As the meaning is fluid and shifting, it can be discovered only by deconstructing the text and examining the underlying layers. Thus, while modernism still had in it some element of nostalgia for the past romantic love for nature, rural-living and bio-diversity of culture, postmodernism is a complete cutting off from the outside world. It marks the climax of anthropocentrism. Cynthia Deitering says that most “Postmodern texts...might seem post-nature” (196) and Dana Philips points out that “analyses of postmodernism are skewed...by what might be called “urbocentricism” (207). Postmodernism has severed man completely from nature. We can say that it is near total loss of ecological conscience.

Another theory that got wide popularity in the 20th century was that of postcolonialism. One of the major works of postcolonial criticism is Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Other leading postcolonial thinkers are Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. While feminist criticism addresses the problem of gender and aims at the emancipation of women, postcolonialism deals with the problems connected not only with gender, but also with race and class. Post colonialism may have passed through different stages, but the chief objective of the theory is to expose injustices done to the people of the colonized world by the colonizers. The problem of identity of the colonized races is the chief focus and the discriminations made against them on the basis of race, class and gender are exposed. Well-known writers whose works have been studied from postcolonial viewpoint are V.S. Naipal, Salman Rushdie, William Harris and James Ngugi. Some postcolonial writers have drawn attention to ecological problems as well by exposing the environmental racism of the colonizers. Part of the Chicana literature is a movement against the environmental injustice done to the Chicana people in the U.S. One of the underlying implications of the postcolonial writing produced by Native American writers is that



injustice done to them on the basis of race, class and gender is preceded by exploitation of their land and resources. But the main concerns of postcolonial writers remain anthropocentric.

Critical theory, thus, until the 1980s was chiefly anthropocentric. Postmodernism, however, in the late stages started recording apocalyptic visions of the planet. The postmodernist writers were beginning to realize that postmodernism as a mode of living and ideology was damaging human identity and leading to a most grave kind of ecological crisis. To use Rushdie's metaphor, the earth was found 'beginning to rock' 'n' roll'. Sustainable economic growth began to appear an impossibility with the world's resources being constantly depleted. The Third World, having got freedom from the colonizers started vying with the latter for economic equality and demanding economic justice, which was found impossible to attain with the planet's current resources. Further, it was found that the path of economic, scientific, technological and military growth--the path of civilization for ages had led to a stage where the future of the planet looked bleak. The environmental crisis had reached apocalyptic proportions and human identity was found to be reaching a stale of neurosis.

### **The Argument**

Literary consciousness was shaken from its long slumber of anthropocentrism in 1980's and became aware of its responsibility towards saving the planet from eco-catastrophic extinction. The concerns for race, class and gender gave place to concern for the planet's support systems that had long been damaged by the loss of man's ecological consciousness and his egocentric arrogance towards nature. A new critical theory, called ecocriticism, was propounded in 1980's to meet the urgent need of the times i.e. the environmental crisis. Before the origin of this theory, critical theories since the 19th century had taken a 'U' turn from realism to 'psychological realism' and anthropocentrism with its idealistic leanings. The time was now ripe for critical theory to take another 'U' turn, this time from anthropocentrism to a new kind of

realism, known as ‘bio-centricism’ and thus, “to place the eco-system rather than humanity at the centre” (Carl 5).

Eco-critical theory accepts the reality of the outside world and shuns idealistic leanings of the other critical theories of the 20th century discussed above. Ever since its origin, ecocritical theory has seen a burgeoning rise. To begin with, it was applied only to nature-writing in the U.S. and the British authors of the Romantic Movement, but gradually, its broad scope was recognized and it came to be applied to almost everything that comes under the umbrella of literature, including postmodernist and postcolonial writing.

Salman Rushdie, today, is one of the major contemporary novelists of the world. He has written nine fictional and four non-fictional works. His non-fictional works are: *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Jaguar Smile*, *Imaginary Homelands* and *Step Across this Line*. The fictional works of Rushdie include, *Grimus*, *Midnight’s Children*, *Shame*, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, *The Satanic Verses*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *Fury*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Shalimar the Clown*. *The Wizard of Oz* is a work of non-fictional film criticism. Rushdie’s second book, *The Jaguar Smile*, is a travelogue, recording the author’s experiences of his visit to Nicaragua. Both *Imaginary Homelands* and *Step Across this Line* are collections of miscellaneous write-ups on literary as well as non-literary topics.

There has been a plethora of criticism on Rushdie ever since he became a world-class author after the publication of *Midnight’s Children*. He has been critically evaluated both by foreign and Indian critics. Among the long line of critics who have written on him, prominent names are Colin Lowndes, Julian Samuel, Alison Lurie, Patricie Merivali, John Haffenden, Joel Kuortti, Damian Grant, D.C.R.A. Goontilleke, James Wood, Tapan K. Ghosh, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran and many more. They have all classed him in the category of postmodernist and postcolonialist writers, whose chief concerns are anthropocentric. He is a writer of the Indian Diaspora. Like other Diaspora writers, his favourite themes are displacement and identity. Other themes found in his writings are hybridity, multiculturalism, history, politics and the juggling together of the personal and the historical. His contribution to the Third World



Literature and the depiction of the postcolonial scene in the erstwhile-colonized nations is of great significance.

Much of Rushdie criticism is concerned with these aspects of his writings. His modernist modes of writing--the anti-realistic modes too have attracted the attention of critics. In the contemporary world, reality has become fluid, relativistic, distorted, disfigured and fragmented. Depicting this kind of 'hyper-reality' is not possible through traditional realistic modes. So Rushdie makes use of anti-realistic modes, like fantasy, fairy-tale, magic realism, and so on. His is a mythic-comic mode in which history, family; personal identity, politics, myth, allegory, parody, satire and fantasy are squeezed in a unique manner.

The interest of critics in Rushdie has not dwindled since the publication of *Midnight's Children*. But, somehow, scant attention has been paid to one aspect of his writings, and that is their ecological aspect. A close examination reveals both overtones and undertones of ecological consciousness in them, especially in the novels, *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children*, *Haroun*, *Fury*, *The Ground and Step Across This Line*. The theory of ecocriticism studies the relationship between the human and the non-human world as depicted in a literary text. A careful perusal of Rushdie's works, especially *Midnight's Children* and *Fury*, shows that Rushdie studies personal lives as ingrained in their socio-cultural-economic physical set-up. Hence, he does reveal concern for the environment and ecological upheavals as well.

There are in Rushdie's novels direct descriptions of toxicity and environmental degradation found in the urban places, especially the metropolitan cities in the present times. Further, some of his works are a condemnation of complexities generated by our civilization, which have led to the present ecological crisis. One can also discover in his writings a tacit search for a solution to this crisis.



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