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Decentring the Human: An Ecocritical Reading of Literature

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Abstract: Literature has long placed the human experience at the centre of its narratives, often presenting nature as a setting, resource, or backdrop to human life. Ecocriticism, however, invites us to look beyond this human-centred view and reconsider the relationship between human beings and the more-than-human world. This article, titled Decentring the Human: An Ecocritical Reading of Literature, examines how literary texts question the assumption that humans are separate from, or superior to, nature. It explores the ways in which landscapes, animals, plants, rivers, and other forms of non-human life acquire significance within literary narratives and challenge the boundaries between the human and the natural world. The study also considers how literary representations of environmental change, exploitation, and ecological imbalance reflect wider questions of responsibility and coexistence. Rather than treating nature merely as a passive background, an ecocritical reading allows it to be understood as an active presence that shapes human experiences and relationships. Through this approach, the article argues that literature can encourage a shift from human dominance towards a more attentive and interconnected understanding of the world we inhabit. In doing so, it highlights the value of literature in developing ecological awareness and questioning deeply rooted anthropocentric ways of thinking.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Human–Nature Relationship, Environmental Literature, Ecological Consciousness.*

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Introduction

Literature has always been closely connected with the world in which human beings live. From landscapes and forests to rivers, animals, and changing seasons, the natural world has appeared in literature in different forms and has often shaped human experiences and imagination. Yet, in many literary traditions, nature is presented mainly from a human point of view—as a setting, a source of beauty, a resource, or a reflection of human emotions. This tendency places the human being at the centre while the non-human world remains largely in the background.

The growing environmental crisis has made such a human-centred perspective increasingly difficult to sustain. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and the destruction of natural habitats have raised important questions about the relationship between human beings and the environment. These concerns have also influenced literary studies, leading scholars to examine how literature represents nature and how cultural attitudes towards the environment are shaped through language and narrative. It is within this context that ecocriticism has emerged as an important approach to literary studies.

Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment and encourages a reconsideration of the traditional divide between the human and the natural world. It questions the assumption that human beings are separate from or superior to other forms of life. Instead, it draws attention to ecological interdependence and to the ways in which human actions affect the wider environment.

The idea of decentring the human becomes particularly relevant in this discussion. It does not mean removing human experience from literature; rather, it involves looking beyond the human as the sole centre of meaning and recognising the significance of the more-than-human world. Animals, plants, rivers, forests, and landscapes can be examined as more than passive objects or symbolic extensions of human experience. Such a perspective allows literature to be read as a space where ideas of domination, dependence, coexistence, and environmental responsibility can be questioned.

This article therefore approaches literature through an ecocritical lens to examine how human-centred thinking can be challenged and how the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world can be reimagined. By shifting attention from human dominance towards ecological interconnectedness, the study seeks to highlight the role of literature in developing a more attentive and responsible understanding of the world we share.

Reimagining the Human–Nature Relationship

The relationship between human beings and nature has never been a simple one. Human life is deeply dependent on the natural world, yet human societies have also transformed, controlled, and exploited it to meet their needs. This contradiction lies at the heart of many environmental concerns. People depend on forests, rivers, soil, animals, and other natural systems for survival, while at the same time their activities can damage the very systems on which they depend. Literature provides a valuable space for examining this complicated relationship because it

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reflects not only how people experience nature but also how they understand their place within it.

For a long time, nature in literature has been viewed primarily through human experience. A landscape may represent loneliness, freedom, beauty, fear, or memory, while an animal may be used to represent qualities associated with human behaviour. Such representations are meaningful, but they can also limit our understanding of nature by making it significant mainly in relation to human emotions and concerns. An ecocritical approach encourages readers to look beyond this familiar pattern and consider nature as something with its own presence and value.

Reimagining the human–nature relationship requires a movement away from the idea of nature as a passive background. The natural environment can influence human lives in ways that cannot be separated from social and cultural experience. A drought can change the livelihood of a community; the destruction of a forest can affect both people and wildlife; and the pollution of a river can disturb an entire network of living organisms. These examples demonstrate that human existence is closely connected to ecological processes. The environment is not simply where human life happens; it is one of the conditions that makes human life possible.

Literature can make this interdependence more visible. Through descriptions of landscapes, representations of environmental change, and narratives involving animals and other forms of life, literary works can encourage readers to recognise connections that are often overlooked in everyday life. When a damaged landscape is presented not merely as a place that has lost its beauty but as a space in which numerous lives have been affected, the reader is encouraged to think beyond immediate human interests.

This reimagining also involves questioning the idea of human control over nature. Modern notions of progress have often been associated with the ability to transform natural spaces for economic and technological development. However, such transformation can carry ecological consequences that become visible only over time. Literature can question this assumption by presenting the costs of environmental exploitation and by drawing attention to forms of life that are often ignored in discussions of development.

At the same time, reimagining the relationship with nature does not require an idealised return to an untouched natural world. Human beings are themselves part of nature and have always interacted with their surroundings. The more meaningful shift is towards recognising these interactions as relationships of dependence and responsibility rather than relationships based solely on control. Such a perspective allows literature to move from a model of human dominance towards one of coexistence.

In this sense, decentring the human becomes a way of widening the literary imagination. It encourages readers to see human experience as one part of a larger ecological network and to recognise that the well-being of human communities is inseparable from the health of the environments they inhabit. Literature, therefore, can play an important role in helping us imagine a relationship with nature based not on possession and domination, but on interdependence, care, and coexistence.

Giving Voice to the More-than-Human World

Ecocriticism encourages a shift in attention from human beings alone to the wider community of life that surrounds them. Literature has the ability to bring animals, plants, rivers, forests, and landscapes into the centre of the narrative, allowing readers to consider their significance beyond their usefulness to human beings. This shift is important because the natural world has often been represented as silent, passive, or secondary to human experience.

The idea of the “more-than-human” world challenges this limited understanding. It recognises that human beings share the world with numerous forms of life and that these forms of life participate in complex ecological relationships. An animal, for instance, need not be understood only as a symbol of human qualities or as a character that serves a human purpose. It can be considered as a living presence whose existence is affected by human decisions and whose survival is connected to the larger ecological system.

Literary representations of forests, rivers, oceans, and other natural spaces can similarly be read beyond their symbolic meanings. A forest may be a habitat for countless species, a river may sustain communities and ecosystems, and a landscape altered by human activity may reveal the consequences of environmental exploitation. When literature draws attention to such relationships, it enables readers to recognise that environmental change affects more than human beings alone.

Giving attention to the more-than-human world does not necessarily mean that literature must literally give animals or nature a human voice. Rather, it involves changing the way readers interpret their presence. What happens to a river when it is polluted? What happens to animals when their habitat disappears? What does the destruction of a forest mean for the forms of life that depend upon it? Such questions encourage readers to consider environmental experiences that are often overlooked from a purely human-centred perspective.

This approach also expands the ethical possibilities of literature. By encountering forms of life that exist beyond familiar human concerns, readers may develop a greater awareness of ecological interdependence. Literature can thus become a space where the boundaries between the human and non-human are reconsidered, encouraging a more inclusive understanding of life.

Ultimately, giving voice to the more-than-human world is part of the larger process of decentring the human. It asks readers to move beyond seeing nature merely as scenery or resource and to recognise it as an essential presence within the shared world. Through this shift, literature can contribute to a deeper understanding of coexistence and ecological responsibility.

Environmental Crisis and the Ethics of Responsibility

The growing environmental crisis has made the relationship between human beings and the natural world an urgent ethical concern. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, habitat destruction, and the loss of biodiversity are not simply scientific or political issues; they also raise questions about how human beings understand their responsibility towards the world they inhabit. Literature, with its ability to explore human experiences and social realities, can provide an important space for reflecting on these concerns.

Environmental destruction is often presented as the result of human progress, development, and the increasing demand for natural resources. However, the consequences of such development extend beyond the immediate interests of human societies. The destruction of a forest, for example, does not mean only the loss of

trees. It can also mean the disappearance of habitats, the displacement of animals, changes in local communities, and the disruption of ecological relationships. An ecocritical reading makes these interconnected consequences more visible.

Literature can also question the idea that nature is an unlimited resource available for human use. When natural spaces are treated primarily in terms of ownership, profit, or development, the value of the non-human world can easily be overlooked. Literary narratives that represent environmental damage can challenge this way of thinking by drawing attention to what is lost when ecological systems are disturbed.

The question of responsibility is equally important. Human beings have the ability to alter their surroundings on a large scale, and this power creates an obligation to consider the consequences of such actions. Ecocriticism therefore encourages readers to move beyond simply observing environmental problems and to think about the ethical relationships that connect humans with other forms of life.

At the same time, environmental responsibility cannot be understood only as an individual concern. Ecological damage is often connected to larger economic and political structures. Communities with fewer resources may experience the consequences of environmental destruction more severely, even when they have contributed relatively little to the problem. Literature can bring such inequalities to the surface and encourage readers to consider environmental issues alongside questions of justice and power.

In this context, literature becomes more than a reflection of environmental concerns. It can question established ideas of progress, expose the consequences of exploitation, and encourage a more responsible understanding of human existence. By recognising that human well-being is inseparable from the health of the wider ecological world, an ecocritical approach opens the possibility of moving from domination towards responsibility, care, and coexistence.

Conclusion

Decentring the human offers a meaningful way of rethinking the relationship between literature, humanity, and the natural world. An ecocritical reading moves beyond the familiar tendency to place human experience at the centre and draws attention to the complex network of relationships that connects humans with animals, plants, landscapes, and ecological systems. In doing so, it questions the assumption that nature exists merely as a resource, setting, or reflection of human concerns.

The discussion also shows that the environmental crisis is closely connected with the ways in which human beings understand and use the natural world. Literature can bring these relationships into focus by representing environmental loss, ecological dependence, and the consequences of human intervention. It can also make visible forms of life and experiences that are often overlooked when the world is viewed exclusively through a human perspective.

Ultimately, decentring the human does not mean diminishing the importance of human life. Instead, it places humanity within a larger ecological framework. Such a perspective encourages a movement from domination towards interdependence, responsibility, and coexistence. Literature, through its ability to reshape perception and expand imaginative possibilities, can play an important role in this shift. By inviting readers to see the world as shared rather than possessed, ecocriticism opens the possibility of a more attentive and responsible relationship with the environment.

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