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Ecological Connotations in *The Old Man and the Sea* and *He Conquered the Jungle*

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Introduction

Ecocriticism throws light on the delicate relationship between the human and the non-human world. It has become a significant area of research in English Studies in the recent decades because of its alignment towards protecting the natural world from human interference. Literary texts with ecological orientation serve as a mouthpiece for nature by stating the various forms of interference into the natural world and the need to safeguard them to prevent the entire destruction of the earth. One of the most significant tenets of ecocriticism is to explain the nature-culture nexus. It is highly impossible to see culture and nature as a separate entity while reading a text from an ecocritical perspective. Cultural development has always had its own impact on nature, and similarly, nature has had its impact on the development of culture. As Glotfelty (1996) puts it "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature" (xix).

The most important factor is that there should be a correct equilibrium between nature and culture, whereas in the current scientific world, this symmetry has been affected by a variety of factors paving way for destruction of the original other, with or without the knowledge of humankind. People think that they are in no way connected to environmental degradation and it is not their responsibility to find a solution for this problem, but the truth is different. Each one of them is responsible for finding a solution as Glotfelty (1996) says, "If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem" (xxi). Only the ecocritical thinking of people will challenge the dangers that haunt the natural world. As Wordsworth puts it,

with this kind of thinking, the human community might see into the life of things. With a wide range of cultures, the human race has now reached the point of environmental degradation. To simply put it, the root cause for all the environmental problems is the diversified cultures and the by-products of those cultures that human community follows. It is high time to prevent environmental degradation and preserve the environment and the natural world. The human community has reached "a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems" (Glotfelty 1996, xx).

Nature serves as the supreme power that controls the universe, but the significance that people give to it becomes questionable in this postmodern world. Even in most of the literary texts, the reality of nature is set aside and only the construction of the text and its impact on the reader is focused upon. The natural world is used only as a backdrop to explain the mixture of emotions of the characters around which the plot revolves. The original nature of "nature" is not well explained. Nature has become merely another text to be discussed and dismissed. The "literal reality" of nature is hidden in such anthropocentric texts and it prompts one to miss the opportunity to find the uniqueness of nature. It is the responsibility of literature to reflect the reality of the natural world with reasonable success, and the ecocritics defend literature's capacity to refer to the natural reality.

Hypothesis

This research paper will attempt to read the novels, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway and *He Conquered the Jungle* by Kesava Reddy from an ecocritical perspective and derive the ecological aspects portrayed in these works.

Man versus Nature

The novels, *The Old Man and the Sea* and *He Conquered the Jungle*, contain a number of natural descriptions in them and both these novels have a close relationship between the naturally existing climax ecosystems and the interference of mankind into it. The story of both these novels takes place far away from an ordinary dwelling place of human race. Majority of incidents in the former takes place far inside the sea whereas the latter one takes place inside a dense forest. Hence, this paves way for abundant natural descriptions throughout these novels and these descriptions lead to numerous statements in relation to the basic tenets of ecocriticism.

In the novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1995), Santiago states that "Man is not much beside the great birds and beasts" (66). These words highlight the big fissure that can be found in the relationship between man and nature. It is only the ego of man that destroys the natural world and this has been portrayed by Hemingway (1995) stating that "But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures" (64). The indifferent attitude of man towards nature is well understood when Santiago prays to Christ to help him hook the giant marlin. There are places in the novel where the author hints at the reality too. This is evident when Santiago says, "Besides I believe it is a sin" (Hemingway 1995, 104). In the novel *He Conquered the Jungle*, there is a description that the old man used to roam about with a catapult hunting birds in his youth. Domination over nature has grown with civilization and this is what the novelist hints at.

The interdependency is a well portrayed with the lines "How strange that both the misery and happiness of a civilized man depend on a beast" (Reddy 1998, 42). He further adds that "There is no difference between the blood of man and animals. No difference that man can detect" (Reddy 1998, 33). The author also makes the protagonist admit the fact that "I too am merely a part of nature" (Reddy 1998, 46). In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago calls the giant marlin as his brother and wishes to feed it at one point of time. He also adds that the fish too is his friend. He admires the great dignity of the marlin and states that he has never seen a fish like it and no human being is worthy of eating it. The relationship between man and nature should thus be intense to preserve nature from extinction. Hemingway tries to dignify nature through these words of the old man. He also adds that nature is the noblest thing with the lines "Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you".

Descriptions of the natural world are abundant in both these novels. In *He Conquered the Jungle*, the old man notes "a snake rubbing its head against a stone was trying to slough off its skin" (Reddy 1998, 15). Furthermore, there are numerous animal similes in these novels. Reddy mentions that the old man searches his lost sow like a rooster behind the baby snake to kill it. Descriptions that belittle nature abound in literary texts and *He Conquered the Jungle* is no exception. Reddy (1998) describes that "The moonlight spread across the sky like flour on the floor" (42). The intensity of the moonlight is also described as it is like "a moustache of an adolescent boy" (Reddy 1998, 4). In one another instance, he states that despair arouse from the old man's heart like a baby snake uncoiling. When the old man approaches the tindra bush with utter silence, it is described as that he goes near it like a fish in deep water and like a snake that had had its fill.

Human Interference

In the novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*, there are many references to the interference of man into the natural world. It can be mentioned that the whole theme of this novel is about the interference of an old man into the aquatic ecosystem. Santiago decides to work out at a place where he can find more fish when he starts his sail. There is also a mention more frequently in this novel that he is not able to see any trace of land nearby indicating that he went too far into the ocean disturbing its natural eco-cycle. There is a sentence stating that "An aeroplane passed overhead on its course to Miami and he watched its shadow scaring up the schools of flying fish" (Hemingway 1995, 69). This indicates that even an aeroplane that is going up high in the air disturbs an ecosystem that prevails farther to it. *He Conquered the Jungle* too serves as a good example for interference of man into a complex ecosystem with its very plot of an old man getting deep into the forest in search of his *sukka* sow. The first interference of the old man into the ecosystem of forest is by killing two rabbits to feed his hunger. Santiago kills numerous sharks that approached the skiff to feed on the dead marlin whereas the old man in the latter novel kills numerous animals which approach his sow.

Ecosystems of Nature

The Old Man and the Sea portrays the climax ecosystem of a great ocean. The participants of the aquatic ecosystem in this novel include man-of-war bird, flying fish, tuna, marlin, broadbill, shark, dolphin, yellow Gulf weed, Sargasso weed, *agua mala*, warbler, hawks, bonito, shrimp, squid, wild ducks, sucking fish, and many more. Interdependence and existence of various creatures and plants within the aquatic ecosystem too is portrayed in this novel. Santiago loves to see the sea turtles eating the *agua mala* which are in the form of bubbles. At one point of time, the old man sees numerous flying fish in a specific area and states that definitely there should be a dolphin pointing out the interdependence of the flying fish and the dolphin that dolphin will feed on flying fish. The old man, on his return journey, hooks yellow Gulf weed in order to collect the tiny shrimps in it and he could find more than a dozen. The existence of yellow Gulf weed in the sea is explained in numerous places. Plankton also finds its way in some places of the text reminding that it is also an entity in an aquatic climax ecosystem. Along with the plankton, some weeds like Sargasso weed and *agua mala* are also quoted in certain parts of the text. Birds also find their place in this aquatic ecosystem. At one point, Santiago seeks the help of a man-of-war bird to trace the existence of fish. There is also a description of a bird that rests on the line in which the

marlin is hooked. Even when the old man enters the sea to begin his epic journey, he thinks of the delicate nature of birds in spite of which they withstand the harshness of the sea.

He Conquered the Jungle too highlights a number of participants of the climax ecosystem of the forest in the form of bats, *bapana* ants, fire-fly, tigress, snake, bear, wild fox, cattle, buffalo, rabbits, quail, mongoose, crocodiles, snails, myna, earthworm, insects, monkeys, eagle, chicks, frogs, babbler, sow, piglets, ox, white caboose fish, elephant, etc.

Animal Characteristics

Animal characteristics and habits are also cited in this text. For instance, the old man could hear two porpoise rolling and blowing. Santiago also mentions that these porpoise will play and love each other making jokes. In one of his dreams, he sees a big school of porpoise and the porpoise were leaping "high into the air and return into the same hole they had made in the water when they leaped" (Hemingway 1995, 80). The character of man-of-war bird is portrayed thus: The bird was encircling over the sea constantly and moving up and down at a regular pace. Santiago could notice the bird suddenly lowering down to the level of the sea parallel when the flying fish were spurting out of water and swim over the surface indicating the presence of dolphin beneath them. By seeing the flying fish, the bird slanted its wings and dived once again attempting to catch the flying fish even though the bird had no chance.

After hooking the marlin, the old man expects it to jump and he also states that if it jumps, the sacs along its back will be filled with air which will prevent the marlin from going deep into the sea. There is a description about sucking fish in which the sucking fish swam around the marlin. They are about three feet long and sometimes swim in the shadow of the marlin and sometimes found attached to the marlin. It is also explained that a shark jumped out of water in the sun and it could smell the scent of marlin's blood and trace the course of the skiff of the old man. The old men in both the novels are well versed with the behaviour of animals. The old man in *He Conquered the Jungle* notices the arrival of jackals towards the *tindra* bush where the sow rests with her ten piglets and says that "Nothing can beat the sense of smell these wild beasts possess. They can sense the arrival of enemies, the existence of food, female animals on heat, and everything else through their power to scent" (Reddy 1998, 39). The old man also states that summer is the breeding time for animals. During this season, the female animals would not come out of the caves and the males would hunt double the amount to support their mates. There is also a mention that the sow could be like a demon if it had given birth to piglets. It will not allow anyone near the piglets and it might be a danger to anything that goes near the piglets.

Description of animal structures can be found in a number of places in this novel. When Santiago sees the marlin swimming just near his skiff, it is described that,

It was higher than a big scythe blade and a very pale lavender above the
dark blue water. It raked back and as the fish swam just below the surface the old man could see his huge bulk and the purple stripes that banded him. His dorsal fin was down and his huge pectorals were spread wide. (Hemingway 1995, 89)

The old man conveys that a dolphin will look green from above and he has noticed it when he was travelling through a turtle boat. One can see stripes and purple spots on its body surface. If a dolphin is hungry, purple stripes can be seen on its sides. Plenty of descriptions of nature in the form of the sun, the moon, stars, clouds, etc., can be seen throughout the novel. When the old man is in the sea, he notices the clouds to be up like mountains making the coast and hills of Havana visible. At a specific point, the hills looked like as if they are covered by snow just beneath the mountains of clouds. He also could see a strange light in the water created by the sun making it more attractive as a notification of good weather and the clouds over him too reflected the same weather condition.

Conclusion - Defeat of Man

With all his knowledge about ocean and marine life, Santiago shows some reluctance in his approach to fish the giant marlin. He regrets for not having the boy with him to manage the huge one. His regret not only stops with Manolin, but also proceeds to a number of things such as salt, lime, weapon, fishing line, stone for sharpening the weapon, radio, for having gone so far into the sea, etc., which clearly indicate his defeat. The ultimate defeat of Santiago is evident in the lines “I wish it had been a dream now and that I had never hooked the fish” (Hemingway 1995, 103). He also realizes “I shouldn’t have gone out so far” (Hemingway 1995, 110). He is even not ready to look at the damaged marlin at one point of time. All the dignity of the old man is ruined by a ridiculous mistake made by him. There is an inherent irony in the conclusion of the novel through the lines “A man can be destroyed but not defeated”. The whole plot of the novel is only about the defeat of an old man, beyond all his skills, who went too far inside the sea for fishing. Santiago is defeated in this context and not destroyed.

In *He Conquered the Jungle*, at one point of time the old man thought "If it's necessary, I'll burn the whole jungle," (Reddy 1998, 43). But towards the end of the novel, legs started to bleed and he lost all his energy and went near a pool to drink water and take some rest. His ultimate objective of saving his sow and its piglets vanished when he witnessed that all the piglets have been killed by the vultures. He felt all defeated by nature and he could remember only the contradictions that prevail in this world.

A comparative study of both the novels reflects a number of similarities between them. Both these novels have a simple vocabulary. One can also find a vivid description of nature and the animal habitat, characteristics and structure in both the novels. The theme of the novels too exhibit similarity such that the old men in both the novels are defeated towards the end.

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