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**Vengeance of Nonhuman Beings: An Ecocritical Reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge' Work,
"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"**

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Abstract:

These days environmental issues are among the most commonly reported ones in the world. The dangerous effects of the environmental problems, which are as old as the history of humanity, began to be felt more profoundly after the Industrial Revolution. In former times the environmental problems were felt only at a local level with the destruction of forests in order to facilitate hunting places and clear lands for farming areas. After the Industrial Revolution the extent of the problem rose and reached the catastrophic disaster level with the extensive fossil fuel use. Nowadays, when environment problems come into question, many people prefer using the term environmental disaster in place of the term environmental problems. This term, environmental disaster, may be remarkable enough to discern the severity of the problem. The role of literature in reaching the public cannot be denied. Ecocriticism tries to make use of this ability of literature in setting forth and expressing environment problems. Since both fictional and non-fictional literature can reach many people, the works which concern with the environmental problems may be beneficial to raise awareness and contribute to inform many people all over the world about the severity of these problems. Creating awareness is an important issue since many people are not aware of the fact that the nature is destroyed by humans, and they neglect that the harm to nature causes the harm to humanity concurrently since there has always been an indissoluble bond between ecosystem and humans. Humans cannot be dissociated from the natural world.

In this study, some brief information about human related environment disasters, social organizations which were established to fight for the rights of nonhuman beings in nature, the function of literature in creating awareness among human beings, the efforts of creating ecological reading and the emergence of ecocritical literary criticism will be given. After discussing Samuel Taylor Coleridge's contribution to nature writing and Romanticism briefly, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" will be evaluated from an ecocritical perspective.

Key Words:

*Ecocriticism, Coleridge,
Romanticism, Eco-centricism,
Anthropocentrism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The destruction of nature by human is not an instantaneous reality. The history of the environmental problems and destruction of nature is as old as the history of humanity. However, this problem was only at local level before the industrialization. Industrialization, accompanied with scientific and technological developments, accelerated this process. After Industrial Revolution, because of the need for energy sources, human begun to use nature as a limitless source of energy. The tremendous impact of the environmental problems began to be felt at a global level because of human being's unsatisfied desire to exploit the natural sources and collect more capital stock.

Some important reasons for the environmental problems which speeded up after the Industrial Revolution problems can be listed as the armament race since World Wars and Cold War, nuclear tests, rapid population growth, unplanned urbanization, excessive water consumption, pollution, excessive carbon dioxide emissions, melting glaciers, etc. It can be alleged that the indispensable precautions have not been currently taken to stop these problems, and nature is sacrificed for the sake of capitalist exploitation. Actually, environmental issues are not regarded seriously by the majority of the population. Many people are not warned necessarily enough about the severity of these problems.

Nature has always been ignored by humans, except very few ones who try to raise awareness and warn people about the jeopardy of exploiting nature for pecuniary advantages. Some significant efforts to create environmental consciousness started at the beginning of 1960s by these very few volunteers. Rachel Carson was one of these early volunteers who tried to give voice to natural disasters with her work *Silent Spring* (1962). Carson expresses her grievances about environmental issues as follows: "No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves" (Carson, 1962, p. 3). Carson was one the earliest writers who attracted attention on the danger of chemicals, radioactive substances and wastes. For Carson, these chemicals and radioactive substances cause birth defects, genetic disorders and cancers:

"During the past quarter century this power has not only increased to one of disturbing magnitude but it has changed in character. The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is for the most

part irreversible. In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world — the very nature of its life” (Carson, 1962, p. 12).

Environmental issues began to be discussed all around the world after 1970s in a more influential way. Some other writers, such as Glen A. Love and Murray Bookchin, tried to attract attention about the severity of environmental problems in their works. After 1970s certain remarkable environmentalist organizations, such as Green Peace, Friends of Earth and Earth First! started their conspicuous activities. These authors and environmentalist organizations tried to warn humans about the inevitable disasters which will have to be faced in very near future, if required precautions are not taken (Güngör, 2013).

Anthropocentricity may be one of the most explicit reasons for the environmental problems. It is an accepted view that humans are anthropocentric by nature and think themselves superior to non-human beings. Though humans are inseparable parts of nature, they forget this reality and cut their own throats with exploiting nature only for financial gains. In anthropocentric approach, human cannot be found guilty with the crimes committed against nature. According to this approach, human is at the center of the universe, and non-human beings are only tools and ordinary creatures or substances whose functions are to serve humanity. Human has not any responsibilities for other assets when processing the soil, using technology or consuming. They regard to their own wishes and interests. Anthropocentrism also accepts the indispensability of the protection of natural sources and advocates the suggestion of protection the environment for the goodness of future human generation but not for any other reasons.

Ecocentrism occurred as a reaction against all kinds of anthropocentric approaches and one of the most influential approaches criticizing and opposing to the master and possessive roles of humans in the world. Ecocentric approach rejects all kinds of views which center humanity at the center universe. According to ecocentrism, human should not have any privileges or priorities in the world, because human is not all alone in the universe. They suggest that living or non-living inanimate beings should have equal rights with human beings and all kinds of anthropocentric approaches should be left aside to overcome environmental problems (Güngör, 2013).

Ecocentrism concerns about the rights of plants and animals which are on the brink of extinction and the protection of ecosystems and habitats. They do not care about human interests. Of course, ecocentric approaches do not deny the rights of humans in nature. On the contrary they

support the idea that humans also belong to ecosystem and an important part of the ecosystem, so they have rights to benefit from nature like other living and non-living beings.

According to ecologist Aldo Leopold, who contributed greatly to the development of the ecocentric approach, nature is a community not an object and humans should have love and respect for nature. Leopold suggest that humans should not continue the role of conqueror if they do not want to give more harms:

“Land ethics translates the conqueror role of Homo sapiens' land-community into its plain member and citizen. It implies respect for fellow members and also respect for that community. In this respect, one should waive the role of conqueror who tries to dominate the land and accept to be a simple citizen of his” (Leopold, 1949, p. 5).

Biocentrism is another ecocentric approach which emerged as a reaction against anthropocentrism. According to biocentric approach all organisms are parts of a larger biotic network. Humans are also in this biotic network like other organisms. Albert Schweitzer coined the phrase “reverence to life”. According to this ethical view, people should respect life. Every living being should have rights to live. This ethical view is against hunting and the idea of laboratory animal, because such activities are unethical. All organisms are valuable not only for humans but also for themselves.

In conclusion, in the anthropocentric approach human is at the center of the universe, but ecocentric approaches assume that human is not at the center of the universe. Human is only part of the ecosystem like the other nonhuman beings but not the master or conqueror of the nature. Like other organisms, human beings have also rights reserved to enjoy natural opportunities: “So every organism has its role to play to keep up ecological balance. Nothing is superior or inferior to others and so there needs a symbiotic living of all organisms of the universe” (Mishra, 2017, p. 114). In ecocentric approaches, the master role of human being is left aside and humanity is recommended to lead a life in harmony with other members in nature. It is particularly emphasized that humans are not unique and indispensable (Güngör, 2013).

The role of literature in reaching the masses cannot be denied. In this context, so as to give voice to the environmental problems more comprehensively, these issues should also be included in literary genres. Environmental problems should be dealt with in literary works from an ecocentric perspective, or literary works should be evaluated from an ecocentric perspective.

In this way, the environmental problems will not only be the subject or problem of ecology, it will also be concern of other disciplines. The burdens of the environmental problems should

not be laid only on the ecologists. Other disciplines should try to find solutions or help to solve these problems. Since ecological troubles are universal ones, the solutions should be found universally, and other disciplines apart from the science of ecology should try to find new ways to find solutions and create awareness in society.

Ecocriticism is a newly created ecocentric literary criticism, but there were many works which took their subject matters from nature before the emergence of ecocriticism. However, there was not a unity in literary field to collect these various works under one single heading. One of the main objectives of eco-criticism is to put an end to this chaos and gather all literary works related to the environment issues under one single heading in order to deal with environmental issues more comprehensively.

William Rueckert coined the term, ecocriticism in his work "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1976. Rueckert proposes a new branch of experimental criticism in which the science of ecology and the concepts of ecology can be used to study literary works. Rueckert argues that ecology is closely related to the present and future of the world and ecological concepts should be applied to literary readings, teachings and writings (Rueckert, 1996, pp. 105-107). Ecocriticism is respectively new critical theory and academic discipline since the 1990s which aims to combine literary criticism with ecology for the interests of nature. Leading ecocritics are Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, Lawrence Buell, Simon C. Estok, Scott Slovic, Glen A. Love (Tošić, 2006, p. 44).

Before the ecocriticism was applied to the literary works, the environment was solely used to meet the social environment of human beings, but ecocriticism changed this perspective and, as Mishra stated, environment became used in more comprehensive way covering all ecosystems:

“Nature here does not mean a mere fancy of its beautiful aspects like plants and animals. Nature here means the whole of the physical environment consisting of the human and the nonhuman. The interconnection between the two creates a bond which is the basis of Ecocriticism. As long as there is a harmony between the living and the non-living, there prevails a healthy eco-system for the benevolence of mankind as well as the earth” (Mishra, 2016, p. 169).

Since ecocriticism brings an ecocentric approach to literary criticism, it focuses not only the interests of mankind but also the interests of all beings. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the forerunners of eco-critical theory, expresses the agenda of eco-criticism as follows:

“How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix).

In summary, the main objectives of ecocriticism include emphasizing the importance of environmental problems, raising people’s awareness and giving voice to nonhumans in literary works. “In short, it is a rethinking of nature in an age of environmental crisis” (Mishra, 2017, p. 115). According to ecocritics, literature should encourage people to reconsider their relationship with nature and bring new ecocentric perspective.

2. NATURE-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN ROMANTIC WORKS

Undoubtedly, some Romantic works focus on nature-human relationship more comprehensively. In order to evaluate the relationship between nonhuman and human beings better and to give voice to nonhuman beings, Romantic works should be re-read and analyzed from an ecocritical perspective to see how these writers reflected the relationship in their works. This re-reading and analyzing will be for the sake of nature and help people getting to the root of the environmental problems, because Romantic writers give particular importance to nature and represent the indifference of people to the ecological problems and the crimes against nature better in their works.

Romanticism started as a new literary movement and reaction against Neoclassicism at the beginning of the eighteenth century and continued its influence until the middle of the nineteenth century in European literature and other artistic branches (Benét, 1965, p. 871). It emphasized on imagination and emotion rather than reason. Romanticism reacts against the

views of Neoclassicism on literature, philosophy, art, religion and politics and the formalist conservatism of the previous centuries.

According to Victor Hugo, one of the leading man of letters who made great contributions to the emergence and development of Romantic movement in literature, Romanticism is "liberalism in literature". Encouraged by revolutionary political ideas and individualism, Romanticism aims to liberate writers and artists from all kinds of restrictions and rules. Because of the influence of the French Revolution in 1789 and Napoleonic Wars between 1803-1815, there were delays in Romantic literature and art in France. However, the French Revolution itself, was effective at the beginning of the Romantic period.

It is believed that Romanticism started in England in 1798 with *Lyrics Ballads*, a book of poems written jointly by Coleridge and Wordsworth, and ended in 1832, when Sir Walter Scott died and the Parliament passed the First Reform Act. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Tennyson, and Browning are among the well-known British Romantic authors (Harmon, 1995, p. 452; Benét, 1965, p. 871). The main values that romanticism advocates include concepts such as individualism, worship of nature, primitivism, interest in the Middle Ages and the East, interest in the lost or foreign cultures, philosophical idealism, opposition to political authority and social traditions, and praise of physical passion, imagination, fight for freedom. (Keach, 1996, p. 456; Benét, 1965, p. 871).

3. SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE AS A NATURE POET

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, known as Lake Poets with other well-known Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Robert Southey, started his literary career as a poet in 1793 by writing poems in A magazine *Morning Chronicle*. He continued writing poems for this magazine until 1795 (Stapleton, 1983, p. 179), but he rose to prominence and became a famous poet after meeting and co-writing poems with William Wordsworth. *Lyrical Ballads* was one of the productions of these collaborations with Wordsworth in 1798. It is a significant turning point not for these two poets, but also for the English Literature since the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* is considered as the starting point for English Romanticism.

“Coleridge contributed to *Lyrical Ballads* with his poems “The Forster-Mother's Tale”, “The Dungeon”, “The Nightingale”, and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”” (Stapleton, 1983, p. 179; Ousby, 1996, p. 86). “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan” were accepted as Coleridge’s masterpieces by literary critics. Although Coleridge and Wordsworth were both

among the pioneers of the British Romanticism movement, their literary characteristics were different from one another. While William Wordsworth depicts the simplicity of everyday life, Coleridge takes his readers to an imaginary world. Coleridge's mysterious and his imaginary world is completely different from William Wordsworth's plain rural world.

Coleridge's distinguishing feature as a Romantic poet in his poems is his paying special attention to nature with an ecocentric approach. Almost all of his poems have respect and praise for natural beauty. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", in which he deals with the human-nature relationship, is one of these poems in which he praises the beauties of the natural world from an ecocentric viewpoint.

3.1. Ecocritical Reading of "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner"

This work may be divided into three parts: (1) salvation of the ship from the ice in the South Pole before the Mariner's killing the Albatross; (2) after the Mariner's killing the bird, the supernatural forces start to take revenge on the crew; and (3) the curse is broken by supernatural powers after the Mariner's blessing the water snakes. This poem may be accepted as a kind of symbol representing the crimes against nature, and natural world's revenge against these crimes (Güngör, 2020, p. 18).

Coleridge shows how anthropocentric and the disrespectful attitudes of humans may result in their own destruction in the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Since humans do not care about nonhuman beings in the world, they do not abstain from committing crimes against nature. When this poem is evaluated from an ecocritical perspective, this anthropocentric attitude of humans will be clearly seen.

The story is told in ballad form, and the speaker of the poem is Ancient Mariner, who tells his own mysterious adventure to a man on his way to a wedding ceremony. When the ship in the Ancient Mariner is working as a sailor is stuck in the ice and waiting desperately for their death to come, the Albatross miraculously appears behind the fog as a sign of good luck. The crew become happy to see the Albatross, because they are sure that the appearance of this bird will work like magic and this bird will save their lives. The Albatross is hosted with warm hospitality by the crew. In this part of the poem, the Albatross is not only a bird but it has some supernatural powers. In fact, the Albatross establishes a bond between the natural and the spiritual world. It represents nature because it is there as a part of nature. It also represents supernatural power, because it appears there because it has been sent by God as a savior to rescue the sailors:

“At length did cross an Albatross, / Thorough the Fog it came; / And an it were a Christian Soul, / We hail'd it in God's name” (Coleridge, 1966, p. 1032).

The Albatross proves to be a bird of good omen. Shortly afterwards, ice splits and the Albatross follows the ship in their voyage through fog and floating ice. Coleridge states what might happen if humans live in harmony with nonhumans in nature in the following lines:

“And a good south wind sprung up behind, / The Albatross did follow ; / And every day for food or play / Came to the Marinere's hollo!

In mist or cloud on mast or shroud, / It perch'd for vespers nine, / Whiles all the night thro' fog smoke-white, / Glimmer'd the white moon-shine” (Coleridge, 1966, p. 1032).

The travel of the Albatross with people indicates human should live in harmony with nonhuman beings and show respect to nonhuman beings in his relations. Human should keep in mind that he is only a member and part of the ecosystem. Living in harmony with the nonhumans is a must for the benefit of humans as well as nonhuman beings. Then, one day, the Mariner inhospitably shoots the Albatross for no reason:

“God save thee, ancyent Marinere ! / "From the fiends that plague thee thus — / "Why look'st thou so?"—with my cross bow / I shot the Albatross” (Coleridge, 1966, p. 1032).

Soon after the Mariner kills the bird, everything changes for human beings. Since the bird was sent by God to save the sailors, the murder of the Albatross is not only a crime against nature, but also against God. From that moment on, physical and psychological torture begins not only for the Mariner and but also for the crew. The crew blame him because of the crime as they are sure that terrible things will happen to them soon. But when the fog cleared off, the crew change their minds and make themselves accomplices in the crime. According to them this bird was only a vehicle for them, and after saving their lives and feeling secure they will not need the bird any more. There will not be any inconvenience in killing the bird.

The crew will soon realize that horrible things happen to them. The sun has some supernatural powers and it is used here as a symbol of authority as well as the influence and God's power. All living or inanimate beings belonging to the natural world begin to take revenge of the Albatross all together. The crew have been cursed for not objecting against the crime. Therefore, the Mariner and the crew are isolated from nature and they are left alone in the immense ocean. The fair breeze continues to blow and the ship sails northward until it reaches the Equator.

As soon as the ship reaches the Line, the wind no longer blows, then the ship suddenly stops. The sea and wind are now silently mourning. From this moment, nature begins to grieve over the Albatross. There is a stillness and an intense sadness in nature. Natural colors in sky and sea are replaced by colors reminding hell, death and revenge. Coleridge gives a sense of stillness in the following lines. This stillness reminds the readers the calm before the storm. There is no wind or motion and the ship is stuck “as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean” (Delany et al., 2003).

This picture does not represent the beauty of nature, but the ugliness of a contaminated and spoiled nature. The murder of the Albatross has polluted the spirit of the Mariner, and this pollution will soon be felt not only in the inner world of the old sailor, but also in the environment. This decay and deterioration, which started on the deck first, is also seen in the sea in a short time. The sea itself becomes rotten and slimy due to this sin committed. These creatures around the ship in the rotten sea are slimy and disgusting, just like the sea:

“The very deeps did rot : Christ ! / That ever this should be! / Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy Sea” (Coleridge, 1966, p. 1033).

The bird begins to be avenged. Although the sea endlessly extends and there is water everywhere, the crew could not find any drop fresh water to drink and the crew’s lips are withered at the root like withered blooms. The thirst also represents their moral deprivation. Since raining shows God's forgiveness and mercy, the Mariner and other sailors on board become devoid of God’s mercy. The supernatural powers deprive the crew of speaking abilities. Here, people communicate with the eyes, not words. The crew blames the Mariner for his sin and accuse him for bringing bad luck. Then, the crew hang the dead Albatross around the Mariner’s neck as a sign of the great sin to remind him the horrible crime he has committed:

“Ah wel-a-day! what evil looks / Had I from old and young; / Instead of the Cross the Albatross / About my neck was hung” (Coleridge, 1966, p. 1034).

The message of Coleridge is clear: The people who commit crimes and the others who keep silent against these ecological crimes are equally guilty. Coleridge states that there is no difference between committing crimes and keeping silent. The curse will not only influence the Ancient Mariner, but all the crew member on board will equally be influenced. The people who commit crimes against nature and exploit nature for financial gain, and those who do not react and object to these crimes are evenly accomplices, because not only the exploiters, but also the unresponsive people have to face the same threats. Everyone is affected by natural disasters.

The crew were killed and punished heavily because of deprivation of water, but the Mariner is imposed the maximum penalty. The Mariner's penalty is to be tortured continually both physically and spiritually. The Mariner continues to pay the penalty for his original sin.

“I clos'd my lids and kept them close, / Till the balls like pulses beat ; / For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky / Lay like a load on my weary eye, / And the dead were at my feet” (Coleridge, 1966, p. 1037).

Whenever the Mariner tries to comfort himself closing his eyes for a short while, the supernatural powers do not even let him feel comfort and he always feels the dead people's hateful gaze. He tries to pray for forgiveness of his conscience, but he will never be forgiven. His tongue and heart are not pure and innocent enough to pray. Both his tongue and heart are sealed by supernatural powers. When he tries to pray, he just makes a sound like a serpent like a snake in his mouth.

The sailors on board die, except the Mariner, and he can find no ways to be freed from the inevitable physical and spiritual tortures until, one night, he is stunned by the beauty of the watersnakes who “moved in tracks of shining white, when they reared, the elfish light fell off in hoary flakes” (Coleridge, 1966, p. 1037) around the ship. He sincerely blesses the watersnakes that belong to the natural world. With this conduct old sailor gains the mercy of the supernatural powers. The Mariner begins to pray after blessing these and feeling affection for these nonhumans in his heart.

The sailor is pardoned towards the end of the fifth episode. After a very long time without sleep and it rained showing God's mercy and forgiveness, thereby eliminating the thirst that represented the sailor's moral deprivation. Forgiveness of the old sailor comes with the rain. The Albatross falls from his neck, and the ship sails home. He is saved, but as a penance he has to travel around the world and his story, which serves as a warning to everyone to love all God's creatures (Delany et al., 2003, p. 28). Coleridge gives the message that crime against nature may be pardoned on the condition that humans should feel regretful and learn to live in harmony with the natural world. Humans should always remember that they are not isolated from the natural world, on the contrary they are inseparable members of this ecosystem.

4. CONCLUSION

As it can be deduced from these lines, it is not only these nonhuman beings in nature that will be badly influenced from these crimes, but humans themselves will get harmed. Unless

adequate precautions are taken against natural disasters and nothing is done about the pollution of water, soil and air, nature will punish human beings. Problems such as floods, landslides, reduction of agricultural lands we have experienced are examples of these.

If human beings, with an anthropocentric perspective, continue to allege that they are superior to other life forms living in the biosphere, both nonhuman and humans will continually be harmed because of the insusceptible attitude of human beings. So as to be freed from environmental disasters, humans should leave such approaches aside. As humans continue to destroy and exploit nature, the negative effects will affect not only nature but also people.

One of the most inevitable causes of the global problems, which humans experience, is the anthropocentrism that keeps people at the center of universe. As long as this perspective does not change, these problems will continue to happen. Instead of an anthropocentric approach, an ecocentric approach needs to be developed in social life. In this regard, literature may play a vital role. Literary approaches such as ecocriticism should be given more voice in literature and literary works should be evaluated from an ecocritical perspective. Thus, wider public will be informed of the ecological problems.

Consequently, the literary works, especially the ones of the Romantic writers should be examined more thoroughly from an ecocritical perspective, because these writers deal with the relationship between man and nature more intensely, and their messages drawing attention to love and respect to nature should not be ignored.

Coleridge, one of the prominent Romantic writers, draws attention of the audience to the reasons of today's environmental problems. He states in his poems that nature is not created for the service of human beings, and humans do not have any rights to harm nonhuman beings. Coleridge warns the readers that selfishness and disrespectful attitude of humans to natural entities will result in permanent disasters. He advises not to murder the nonhuman beings. He advises to love, give respect and learn to live in harmony with other nonhumans in this world. This is a must not only for the sake of nonhumans but also for human beings.

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