

Ecological thinking in the poetry of John Clare against the backdrop of Anthropocene

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The much-contested concept of Anthropocene which is still new and evolving refers to the present geological era which closely follows the Holocene, which many scientists think, hasn't come to a definite conclusion. In essence Anthropocene refers to the huge atmospheric, geological and geomorphological changes brought to the planet by a single species - man. Many modern day ecocritics like Richard D.G Irvine and Mina Gorji believe that the concept is not new and the seeds of this line of thinking which finds man responsible for the vast, irreversible and destructive changes on the planet, were laid even in the 18th Century by poets like John Clare (1793-1864).

Ever since the time man began to record his thoughts, impressions and imaginings on a medium outside himself, it was Nature that provided him with ample materials. Perhaps it was in poetry that Nature found its perfect home in human language. The flexibility of poetic imagining and its oblique way of capturing the world around in words, images and metaphors synced perfectly with the spirit of Nature. For the poets, Mother Earth, Gaea, as the Greeks fondly addressed her, was more than a piece of rock with a thin layer of sand, air and ocean spiralling around the dark space without a purpose. They found in it a soulmate and also a perfect crucible where they could fill up with their feelings and emotions.

The evolution of Pastoral poetry in literature explored the human fantasy of flying away from the humdrum modern life to some idyllic setting in a distant world, reminiscent of our lost Garden, Eden. The genre drew on the tradition of the great ancient Greek poet Theocritus who wrote about rustic people living their fulfilled life in rural surroundings. He not only inspired poets like Virgil who delineated life between rural and urban life in his poems but also spawned a whole generation of writers in the 19th Century Romantic age who began to search for a new poetic sensibility that would distance itself from the Enlightenment ideas of the western world which placed man at the centre of the world.

Romanticism, a phenomenal intellectual, artistic and literary movement was described by Isaiah Berlin in the book, *The Roots of Romanticism* as "the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred"[2]. The movement's rallying cry, 'Return to Nature' later influenced the ecocritical movement in literature. So many concepts that evolved in the twentieth century can be traced back to the Romantic period.

As James McKusick observes in his Introduction: *Romanticism and ecology*: "much Romantic writing emerges from a desperate sense of alienation from the natural world and expresses an anxious endeavour to re-establish a vital, sustainable relationship between mankind and the fragile planet on which (we) dwell." (123)

So the quest for beauty in the picturesque landscapes in William Wordsworth's poetry doesn't stop at the peripheral level following the pastoral tradition but it yearned to go deeper and deeper to find a lost harmony with Nature. The new poets also wanted to project their souls into the green world and want the latter resonate their states of mind with empathy. Thus enlivened with this 'new' subjectivity attributed by the romantic poets of the 19th century Nature began to function as a sounding board for different states of the human soul.

But the projection of human subjectivity into the world around still puts man and his sentiments at the centre of the stage even as the primary business of the Romantic movement was to destabilise or decentralise his position giving importance to the nonhuman. Romantic movement directly addressed and undermined the human hubris so that man could regard himself as only one of the many strings of the great web of Nature. A surfeit of praise about the beauty of nature wouldn't open anyone's eyes to truth. Because man's growing lust for power, his blind embracement of industrial and technological developments and all the money that poured in as a result spared him no luxury to appreciate the beauty of nature which was fast vanishing.

It is against this background one should read the nature poems of the quintessential Romantic poet, John Clare, born to a farm-labouring parents in the village of Helpston in 1793.

Clare's early verse attempted to capture in detail the beauty of world around his home. With little formal education he began writing short pieces and also poems, but most of them were published only posthumously. In his works he tried to capture the beauty of his village Helpston. The success of his first collection of poems, *Rural Life* (1820) published by John Taylor brought attention and recognition to the poet. The *Rural Muse* published in 1835 was his last major work.

Clare moved out of Helpston to the neighbouring town Northborough. He suffered a mental breakdown in 1841 following it and had to be institutionalised. Amidst all the gloominess that was falling so fast in the poet's life, Clare tried vigorously to keep alive the beauty of Helpston, his village, joining in its struggle to survive at least through his poetry, as the real place out there, was falling prey to the greed of man.

Earlier, the tradition of Sensibility from James Thomson through the poets of the 18th and 19th century, even while raving about the beauty of nature, failed to see the dark side of the picture, the significant contribution of human beings in undermining the harmony of nature through their actions. The poet like a spectator only passes through the gallery of delightful scenes of the sublime nature, lavishing praises on them, sometimes seeing his own yearnings and sorrows in those pictures, but never like a true local, aware of the threats that the particular landscape or environment has begun to face with the advent of technological progress.

It was perhaps William Wordsworth, one of the most prominent nature poets of the Romantic movement who first brought an ecological consciousness to poetry in the English language. In his poetry, he expressed a deep and intuitive knowledge of his Lake region that went far beyond the apparent and the picturesque. The shepherds' yearning to live a simple life in his poem 'Michael' (1800) is depicted to be trapped in the folds of urban culture. The concern of the poet about the environmental impact of the proposed Kendal and Windermere Railway that might throw the serene and independent world of the shepherds into a mess, inaugurated a new era of environmental activism in literature.

But in his most elemental works, the readers can see Wordsworth exploring his soul and inner consciousness all at the expense of giving primary importance to nature in all its details. True to the tradition of sensibility propounded by poets like Thomas, Wordsworth too attempts to dramatise the sentiments and subjective response of the beholder rather than pulling the poetic camera to bring nature into sharp focus. In poems like 'The Tintern Abbey' (1798) and 'The Prelude' (1850) the poet's mind develops from the intuitive and unmediated partaking in the joy of nature towards a mediated response where the faculty of poetic imagination to enhance and recalibrate the objects of perception is celebrated. The observer is more important than the observed. This is a quintessential Romantic feature that celebrates self-consciousness or as Keats called, 'the egotical sublime', which betrays an apathy to regard nature as it is. In his most celebrated works the great Romantic poet though he takes into account the flora and fauna of his native place, he failed to see their complex interactions and their ecological significance as he was more bent upon using them surfaces rather than depth.

But in John Clare's poetry one can see the poet's deep commitment to bring nature into the forefront in its purest and detailed form. The meticulous knowledge of local wildlife makes Clare one of the finest naturalist in English literature. Though he had no deep taxonomical knowledge in the Linnaean tradition of natural history his curiosity to know the animals and birds of his native village that started from his childhood helped him cover the failing. Illiterate to the 'official' Latin terms for species and genus, Clare used the vernacular to identify the flora and fauna by sight. He hated collecting specimens for his private study but preferred to observe beings - birds and butterflies directly from their habitats. He noted down the characteristics of their seasonal migrations and other behaviours. 'The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare' published in 1983 brought to light Clare as one of the finest observers of the natural world.

Clare's poetry finds its place far away from the utilitarian view of the world that can be identified in many works of his contemporaries. Of course he rejoiced in the beauty of nature, but he vehemently opposed the very idea of it existing for human purposes. Even aesthetic contemplation of nature without responsibility was anathema to our poet who liked to see himself just another curious animal doing his chores, So it is very difficult to

see in his poetry, natural objects chosen and distributed harmoniously across by poetic imagination to force out the picturesque scenery.

Clare's close observation of nature and his intense engagement with the nonhuman living beings in it gave him a deep insight into the web of life, the interdependence of all beings, a feature unprecedented in English literature hitherto. The rich tapestry of the world where diverse beings live in harmony, in symbiotic relationships, finds expression in poems like 'Shadows of Taste.' In it he condemns the 'man of science' who prefers to collect specimens rather than use his faculty to observe:

While he unconscious gobbets butterflies
And strangles beetles all to make us wise (Clare 28)

A narrow taxonomical view of nature might make an observer blind to the beautiful and harmonious relationships existing in unspoiled natural habitats.

For a poet unadulterated with hubris even a stunted oak tree is not a single being, but a crowd, a habitat where so many living beings act out their lives depending on one another. Clare knew the pitfalls of turning emotional while describing nature as that might only take him down the much beaten path of sentimental anthropomorphic outlook of his predecessors who found in nature their sounding board. The dispassionate tone in many of his poems intentionally gives way to nature speaking for itself. See how emotionally detached the poet is while describing predators stalking their prey:

In the barn hole sits the cat
Watching within the thirsty rat
Who oft at morn its dwelling leaves
To drink the moisture from the eves
The redbreast with his nimble eye
Dare scarcely stop to catch the flye
That tangled in the spiders snare
Mourns in vain for freedom there
(Shepherd's Calendar, 'September, 107)

The intricate food chain the readers see in the poem while the stalker becomes the stalked intends to throw light on the ecological balance inspite of the tense interaction among the characters in the poem. The reader who wants the poet's comment or his interpretation or valuation of what is happening in the poem stares at a blank wall. By evading any judgement on predators and victims, Clare boldly advances his ecological vision where no animal, including man, enjoys the privilege of judging any other.

But one might wonder what could be Clare's position on the role of human beings as predator, as the spoilsport in the harmonious nature. What is happening in the small hamlet of Helpston resembles or forebodes the plight of nature and the planet. Clare strongly condemns man's reckless assault of sparrows and their nests in the poem 'Summer Evening':

Prone to mischief boys are met
Gen the heaves the ladders set
Sly they climb & softly tread
To catch the sparrow on his bed
& kill em O in cruel pride
Knocking gen the ladderside (Early Poems, 1:9)

The horrifying spectacle of a badger captured and tormented by a crowd of villagers features in a famous poem, 'Badger.'

He falls as dead and kicked by boys and men
Then starts and grins and drives the crowd agen
Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies
And leaves his hold and cackles groans and dies (John Clare, 247)

The poem narrated from the point of view of the poor creature not only speaks for a badger or animals at large, but it also raises its protest against reckless human violence unleashed against nature.

When the unstoppable juggernaut of progress finally hit his home village John Clare could only bereave the gradual loss of pure beauty that he enjoyed during his childhood. The British Parliament in the late 18th century began passing Enclosure movements which gave farmers permission to fence in property that cut off people from entering what were once open fields that provided them food.

Along with that, the slow vanishing of streams, and the destruction of all took a toll on the poet's sanity. In his poetry Clare tried to evoke the unspoiled beauty of the landscape of Helpston in detail. He did not adopt the sentimental way while describing nature after his contemporaries. Clare knew that faithful observation and recording it in poetry would go a long way in creating an environmental consciousness in readers who might eventually realise that economic progress is a one-way ticket to total destruction.

In the poem 'Helpston' Clare nostalgically evokes the years long gone by:

Where flourish'd many a bush & many a tree
Where once the brook (for now the brook is gone)
O'er pebbles dimpling sweet went wimpering on
Oft on whose oaken plank I've wondering stood
(That led a pathway o'er its gentle flood)
To see the beetles their wild mazes run
With getty jackets glittering in the sun (22)

Thus he affirms solidarity to all nonhuman beings - insects, animals, birds, plants, and rivers of his village.

Whatever he saw and relished in his childhood - the bush, 'many a tree,' and the brook that is now gone leaving just a skeleton of that unadulterated nature, the pebbles - disappeared. The rigour and particularity of Clare's language tries to replace the 'wimpering richness of the old river'. There is anthropomorphism in these lines, but the poet doesn't resort to it for projecting his trite and selfish sentiments.

All lyrical and narrative poems are situated in some place. The dedicates time and space to delineate the particular features of local nature- the fauna and flora and the meteorological conditions of that place - in detail. That is how poetry becomes environmental. Ecopoetry warns us that what we ignore or disregard or fail to register eventually gets destroyed, erased, be it a forest, a coral reef, a rare species or a human community.

According to John Clare's poetic philosophy an organism gains its value and meaning from its habitat, where it lives in symbiotic relationship with other organisms that harmoniously share the same home. Shredded away from this, a being can only be a withered thought, an inkling of its former self, never complete and totally devoid of purpose and beauty. The poetic concept of environmental awareness should be based on this oikos where the poet has the noble duty to witness the interdependences of the fragile community of creatures and note them down faithfully in poetry. In the long tradition of English-speaking world such a deep insight into the harmony of beings was unprecedented.

Michael Serres warns us that we forget the word environment and assume that we humans are at the centre a system of nature. In Wordsworth's home at Grasmere Jonathan Bates sees a logos of the home in which man has come home to nature and the place takes on a wholeness, a unity that is entire. In the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge we read the grand conception the whole planet as a home, a house-hold, an inter-dwelling place of all species.

Clare takes his local environment in his poetry like an an ardent devotee, and like Wordsworth, whatever he imbibed during his childhood from his homeland, he carried it straight to the poetry of his adulthood. All his career, he tried to build up the 'locality' of his writing, always anxious whether he could give adequately intense voice to his place using vivid description.

The 'rootedness' to the local environment that is essential to Clare's poetry gets shaken with the implementation of new laws. Aesthetic pleasure or economic utility of a place can never have any appeal to the poet who gave intrinsic value to all the flora and fauna that

constituted Helpston. He was horrified when the new enclosure law put an end to the old style open-field agriculture of his homeland. For the preservation of waste lands, forests, marshes, fens and all the myriad creatures - known and unknown - he made desperate appeals to the system to call back its new enclosure law. The privatisation of open land would have huge environmental impact, the poet seer could see. His sanity began to take a toll at the sight of walls, 'No Trespassing' signs and also at the incursion of railways. Calls for environmental activism and social justice is a predominant feature of 20th century ecocriticism, but in the poems of Clare, nearly two centuries ago, readers can already see the smouldering embers.

The enclosure elegies of John Clare, unpublished during his time, were a voice of environmental outrage. 'The Lament of the Sword Well' is a painful voice of a poor labourer who lost the rights to his land thanks to the new law. crying out against the state-sponsored plundering of the land. It is "one of the first and still very few poems to speak for the Earth" (McKusick as cited in Morrison, 2002), personifying the land.

The new law not only depraved the ecosystem of Helpston, it also affected the common men who lost their independence from the market economy and became pauperised. This manipulation of the legal system primed for the appropriation of the land that the laymen once enjoyed freely reminds the reader about the postcolonial and neocolonial situation. The enclosure of Swordy Well in 1809 was going to be repeated a million times in a million other places around the planet by empirical forces. All at the cost of the flora and fauna endemic to various places which cannot be brought back again to the planet.

The strong but ineffective cry of the poet, tried to represent the nonhuman as what the ecologist Aldo Leopold's statement, 'thinking like mountain'.

With the shift from the human centric view of the Romantic poets to the nonhuman-centric view of his poems - by making the land speak for itself, the common man speak for himself - John Clare altered the course of nature poetry.

The harmonious home he had felt in his childhood, the oikos, now turned into shambles as human greed reached out to enclose or wall in the free earth. Humanity and Nature parted ways, and man began to sense a homelessness he could not shake off. The yearning for the lost home becomes intense in the Bird Poem series of John Clare. Mina Gorji says, “we find Clare working through his preoccupation with home and homelessness, trying out different forms and languages for expressing a sense of loss and displacement, and finding new ways of articulating his spiritual need for peace and sanctuary”(Gorji 29).

Perhaps it is the home that makes the existence of an organism profound and complete. Clare's search for a home remains unsuccessful in his poetry, just as his reunion with nature remains incomplete. Home is always elsewhere. But being not at home to a particular locality can make a man feel at home even in the most alien places in the world, he can be happy anywhere.

John Clare's moving poems about nature and in particular Helpston set the stage for an environmental consciousness hitherto unseen in English literature. Dismissing the utilitarian aspects of nature, he held close to the intrinsic value of all the flora and fauna that constituted to his village. He raised a strong voice for the preservation of pristine nature, waste lands, rivers, marshes, ancient trees and sustainable open field agriculture. His insight into the interconnectedness of different species that constituted the world he knew made the poet a strong advocate of environmental thinking and social justice. His concept of home and his environmental philosophy that attributed an intrinsic value to nature irrespective of their utilitarian value predate the concepts of deep ecology, a social movement that began in late twentieth century. His poems resonate with ideas that the proponents of Anthropocene in the late twentieth century would take up as a new concept which would throw the human impact on nature into relief.

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