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## **“Echo” Criticism**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*“Echo” criticism is an eco-critical study; an endeavour to trace the echoes of ecology/eco-consciousness in the popular myths of Babylonian, Greek, Egyptian and Indian myths. The object is to show how the aforementioned pagan civilizations comprised essentially of deeply eco-conscious people who associated nature conservation with religions and gods to instil fear in the community, guided by the conception that scare-tactics would keep humans in check rather than gentle persuasion. It also hints at how the words of the prescient ancients are discarded by the modern mechanical man as myths.*

**Keywords:** *Eco-criticism, mythology, religion*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Man has come a long way from his barbaric lifestyle to one that of ease and refined manners. He has left behind his strenuous labour and toil, to live a life of mechanical monotony. He used to be a nomad of choice. He used to flee from prairie to alluvial river beds. He used to sleep under the roof of the naked sky and count the diamonds in the sky. Today, in the pulsing beat of changes, man has come a long way from his innocent, complacent self to become a modern caveman. He, also, is a nomad. A nomad by choice.

Man in his quest to conquer the world seldom stopped to think of his nurturing mother-nature; only a few realized that they were drawing in their own doom and they attempted to enlighten their communities, intimately the urgency of taking a step back before man destructs himself; be their modes of expression restrained and insinuating or qualified and unreserved, they all endeavour to inculcate a sense of responsibility towards the ecosystem, a need to recognize the irreplaceable worth of the environment-the most gracious gift man has

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ever received. Eco-criticism is that emerging field of literature which dwells on the human perception of the environment. This paper is a modest endeavour to trace the echoes of this perception from the historic times to the present day.

Eco-criticism is a fairly new theory in the field of literature. Cheryll Glotfelty, in *The Eco-criticism Reader* defines eco-criticism as *the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment* (viii). William Rueckert may have been the first person to use the term *eco-criticism*. In 1978, Rueckert published an essay titled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism* which focused on “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.” (107).

In spite of its novelty, the concern it highlights captured attention and widespread participation. The global sensitivity of the underlying issue of environmental dilapidation can easily be figured as reason behind the rise of this vigorous activism. Incipient causes are many and they stretch to the soil of history itself. Over the course of time, many have voiced their concerns about the natural world in many ways.

Myths and religious ethics should be regarded as the first of the shrewd eco-critical writings. The wisdom of unsophisticated man adopted the impeccable tactic of scaring the man to submission. Thus, occurred the marriage of nature with myths and totems and religions. They slyly made up myths about snakes’ curse, the avenging Nature Deities, the sanctity of the *Gomatha*, etc. the list of esteemed animal gods in all primeval civilizations is endless and compelling. But, the concern should be on the causal reason behind the manufacture of such totems. The object of this paper is to search for the root of such veneration and beliefs. It is plain as daylight that, man, whether caveman or businessman never cared for anyone but himself. He has always been selfish enough to murder his mother and siblings. To him, nothing has ever been worth his love. Thus, labelling just the modern man as ruthless and as assassin is tenacious and vain.

The myths and religions were more covert and implicit in the portrayal of the same concerns. This project attempts to elucidate that the eco-critical theory sprouted from the soil of history; the eco-consciousness that hovered subtly in the breaths we took, the steps we took, the

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beliefs we held, in the darkness we feared, until the subtle probing was not enough and poetics geniuses intimated the conscience in their beautiful lyrics. This mini-research paper is an endeavour to trace the cryptic and allegorical eco-conscious messages in popular myths of the world (particularly in Indian mythology).

### **ECHOES OF ECOLOGY**

Folklores are classic. They are simple and unpretentious expressions of a time when man couldn't distinguish himself from nature; where he ended, nature began. Indian history has a rich collection of soulful folklores to boast about; within India, the regional varieties of the same are vast, as well. The multifarious civilizations of the world are all so different; the topographical peculiarities separate them beyond irreconcilable differences. But, underneath them all, grounding them, lay the resounding consciousness that echo the significance of nature. All major civilizations such as Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman and particularly Indian civilizations can proudly brag a rich heritage accompanied by an intricate vault of myths and tattles.

Myths often come off as stimulating storehouses of materials effecting awe and nightmares. They instil a certain panic and urgency within the cult pertaining to the subject they revolve around. Most often, the foundation of all myths are nature or related natural phenomenon. These aphorisms are sheathed in elements from the natural world. Most of us forget to investigate into the mysteries underlying the tales of the avenging Earth Goddess or the furious Sun God and naively pass them off as the barbaric thoughts of their unsophisticated ancestors. They not only fail to demystify the inert truth behind them, but also underestimate the intellect of their ancestors. It is high time that man cease to mock but, be wary of the realities of the past and endeavour to assay the tales to extract its poignant allegorical dimensions.

Eco-critical tenacity in Egyptian consciousness in order to be traced requires a scrutiny of the original Egyptian myths.

Egyptian mythology was an abode of Nature Gods. They worshipped the flora and the fauna. Sacred animals were worshipped as Gods such as *Apis*-the bull, *Petesuchos*- the crocodile, *Ba*

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*Neb Djedet*- the sacred ram and *Bennu*- the birds were declared and worshipped as sacred would enforce an automatic status as a totem upon these animals. If we inspect closer into these sanctified animal species, we can mark out a certain inclination in these selections of fauna. The bull's horn was (and still is) by certain cults used as flutes, even as utensils. Even now, it is a popular decorative material. Crocodiles are slaughtered today for their skin. This fact makes it plausible that, such a rampage existed even then. Ram, like all the aforementioned animals have always been victims of man's avarice; stripping a sheep off its natural shield from the climate, is something that humans barely even blink their eyes at any more.

Intimate reflections of environmental awareness and concerns can be found in the Egyptian myths of origin. Everything began from *Nun*, the primal ocean chaos, which enveloped the nothingness with the seeds of everything to come. The *Sun god* reposed here from where he rose as the power called *Ra* and asexually procreated *Shu* and *Tefnut*, who respectively gave birth to *Geb*, the earth God and *Nut*, the sky goddess. The creation of the physical world thus attained, completed by the creation of men from Ra's tears. Ages passed by, Ra grew old and decrepit; unwittingly and ungratefully, the men conspired against Ra. Enraged by such disloyalty and ingratitude, Ra summoned a council of the Gods where they decided to destroy the mankind. Thus, Ra dispatched the goddess *Hathor* to obliterate humankind. Hathor effectively annihilated humanity by tens of thousands until only a tiny remnant was left. Taking pity on humanity, Ra relented and spared the life of the remaining few.

This terse rendition of a vestige of the Egyptian myth gives one much to ponder over and analyse. Looking at the above-mentioned origin myth through an eco-critical lens would bring out the Egyptian ecological perspective. The controversial and ambiguous Big-bang theory is generally accepted by the whole world now. As did the Egyptian ancestors, apparently; only their knowledge was embellished with fantastic elements. The world as we know it today began from some chaos; grew into the nature that sustains us. Ra is symbolic of this altruistic, nurturing ecosystem where men were born into her lap. He thrived there, explored the savage surroundings and learned from the environment to rise and evolve. Once he learned to stand on his own feet- unbeknownst to the reality that nature still clutched onto him to steady his feeble steps- he turned against his care-taker. He wanted to be the master.

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The Egyptians must be trying to convey the avenging fury nature wrecked upon the ungrateful humankind. The onslaught of the nature's fury upon them without so much as any insight into their causal factors and the resultant colossal damages they had had to endure may also be located in the eccentric tenor of their origin myth. The awe-inspiring myths reciting the fury of Gods to efface mankind, the incorrigible instincts of humans to turn against their life-lines and the ever-forgiving quality of nature are all thus encompassed in these myths.

The Egyptian myths are largely didactic, too. It has taught its people a lifestyle sustainable to all. For instance, the god *Osiris* and his wife, goddess *Isis* are regarded as influential figures that instigated the barbaric folk to relinquish cannibalism and led them through a peaceful time under their reign, framing for them a legal code and taught them to relish in the harmless pleasures of music and agriculture.

These myths are not just foreboding and didactic. Beyond the status of being an augury, the Egyptian mythical stock of Egypt can be read as some of the earliest forms of eco-literature. For instance, the myth of *Osiris* can be interpreted as the symbol of the topographical peculiarities of Egypt itself. *Osiris* personifies the Nile with its annual flooding and retreat. *Isis* represents the fertile farmland of Egypt which was made bountiful by Nile. *Set*, *Osiris*'s evil brother typifies the barren expanse of the desert land that divorce the Nile and the fruitful land. *Nephtys*, *Set*'s wife who had borne a child of *Osiris*, symbolize the moderate lands between the farmland and the desert. Thus, we can safely conclude that such naturalistic pedigree of the Egyptian gods symbolize the various forces of nature – earth, sky, air, humidity and the sun. *Osiris* stands for the altruistic, mighty, self-replenishing Nature and *Set*-ever deceptive, ungrateful and ignorant- stands for the humanity.

The Babylonian heritage was not wanting for a strong mythological belief system, either. But, the Babylonian mythology is more materialistic and worldly, lacking the transcendental inclination of the Egyptian myths. The Babylonian gods themselves are the epitomes of the passion and lust of human beings, who revel in the unscrupulous acts of erotic nature, feasting and brawling. Thus, these sets of myths are more direct in their approach and are easier to be translated into an eco-critical affair.

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A similarity we can observe in these two civilizations is the use of powers from the environment again as the manifestations of Gods. The Babylonians, too, had their own nature gods; *Enlil* – the god of deluge and hurricane; *Ea* – a god of the waters; *Shamash*- the sun god; *Tammuz*- the harvest god, to name a few.

The Babylonians, too, have tales that hint at nature's fury upon the human race. They have a legendary story about when the gods were so furious at the human race that they decided to drown the humanity to extinction. But, *Ea*, the god of water and wisdom, took pity upon the imprudent humanity and directed a human representative *Uta-Napishtim* to build a ship for his family and living creatures. By the time the cloudburst commenced, the latter was prepared with the vessel. This story bears strong resemblance to the story of Noah's Ark from the Bible. In both these instances, one can trace the correlation man has assumed between Gods and Nature. Assuming divinity in nature would naturally warrant reverence and devotion to nature; maybe that was the target the Babylonian ancestors had in their minds, too. Also to be addressed with due care, in the tales is the equivalent priority they convey that animals warrant. Human should not flatter himself as the sole benefactors of the natural world. Animals, too, reap its reward, and perhaps are more deserving of a life on earth, as they do not have it in their system or instincts to plot and conspire against each other and the sustaining environmental boons. These, myths again, can be read as reminders to man – to live and let live.

The Greeks are not deprived of a significant knowledge of the ecosystem; but, the orient around the impending doom nature would wreak upon mankind. All of the Greek myths accentuate the defencelessness of mankind when nature brings him destruction and catastrophe; he merely falls a victim to its fury incapable of even moving out of its way; this is paradoxical, considering man's obtuse ways of wreaking menace at each other at every turn. The Greek gods were not nature good, but may be read human allegories who aspired to bring the world under his feet.

Moving on from all the exotic civilizations and their foreign myths and gods, eco-criticism has unparalleled scope for diversified explorations in our indigenous culture. Indians, can proudly claim to be the aborigine of a culture at a national level, and another, of their locale,



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at the same time. Also, have they absorbed into their psyche various elements from the numerous religions that coexist there ‘?’ In fact, the combined beliefs of the various belief systems have led to a number of novel and distinctive faiths, too. But, even amidst this dynamism, the root belief system still holds strong. To name a few instances, one can inspect into their everyday life and norms. People hesitate to kill a snake that takes up shelter in their garage- our ethics scream reminders of the sanctified status of snake. Students would never dare crush an offending centipede, as it is deemed as the vehicle of *Saraswathi*- the goddess of Knowledge and Wisdom. Cows are worshipped as *Gomatha* and people would deem it as a blessing to witness her giving life to her calf; north Indian busy roads are no strangers to hours of traffic blocks, as people throng to witness such a blessed sight. An Indian could go on an illimitable measure of time stating the peculiar beliefs of the land.

Indian mythology maintains a peculiar relationship with Hindu religion; the former is so constructed and believed that it is inextricable from and one with the latter. It can be boldly said that the ancient myths of India cannot exist in isolation with its religious roots and backdrop.

All the popular notions of ancient India can be traced to the primitive Indian texts called the *Vedas*. They are hymns in praise of the Aryan deities, each of whom personified the various natural elements like the sun, thunder, storm, air, water, fire and so much more; they were sung with the materialistic motives of gaining power, wealth, superiority, etc. In that respect, the ancient Indian civilization resembled that of the pecuniary and egoistic interests of their Greek counterpart. Despite of the despotic thoughts they harboured, their authoritative and egotism were never directed towards the nature, but towards his fellow humans. Nature has always occupied a superior, divine rank in the ancient Indian ideology, ie. Hinduism.

Some of the prime Hindu gods are : *Indra*- the fickle and monomaniacal god revered by the Indian folks as the provider of rain to nourish the fertile lands; *Mitra*- the Sun god and *Varuna* – the moon god; *Agni*- the god of fire; *Siva* – the god of destruction, reputed as quick tempered, at the same time, famous for his unparalleled benevolence upon his subjects, *Kali*- Siva’s consort, equally formidable.

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Easy interpretations of the Vedas and its patrons may make the Hindu philosophy seem superficial and fanciful written by egocentric patriarchs with the superior vision of dominating the world. But, once one tries to strip the many layers of fantastic elements off it, the philosophy would reveal itself as an ideal lifestyle- a sustainable one. On the surface, the gods and their superpowers, definitely come off as mind-boggling; but, they represent a civilization of higher thoughts and sublimity that has the power to transcend time and still hold strong to guide the world. But, the misfortune lies in the inability of man to decipher the poignancy of the Vedic verses.

Hindu religion has its ethics closely tied to the notions of a symbiotic relationship between man and nature. The philosophy intends to sophisticate man with the higher morale holding a maternal love of and for nature. To ensure the effective functioning of these visions, the hermits qualified everything tangible and ideal with divine significance. Attributing such a holy reputation evoked a protective feeling and awe towards the world, in favour of actions that despised the exploitation of nature. While man could not be redeemed of his inherent animosity to his fellow humans, the spiritual upbringing always kept him in check from making nature a victim of his disastrous deeds, to an extent still; he learned to recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. In the Hindu ideals, the reality lies in the indistinguishable bond the divine maintain with the natural world.

The Vedas also advice man to be patient and conscious of the nature's fits. The many tales of the furious Indra or Agni or the avenging Bhumidevi are all forebodings to man, to protect nature like he would his own self; that nature might, at times be hostile and merciless, but, will eventually yield to man's helpless cries. Earthquakes and floods are not recent phenomena. Such natural occurrences must have wrecked catastrophic results upon the mankind even in the incipient eras of civilizations. But, the prophets realized the significance behind its occurrence and forbade man from committing a repeat of his errs. The Bhagavad Gita advises us not to try to change the environment, improve it, or wrestle with it. If it seems hostile at times tolerate it. Ecology is an inherent part of a spiritual world view in Hinduism.

The *Hindu Dharma* with its pronounced affinity towards nature has been a subject of immense fascination. Who got lured the most into the Indian foundation has been none other than the



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self-proclaimed secular West. Now, why would the *Occident* find the *Oriental* values worthy of their dogged investigations?

Another inevitable aspect pertaining to the Indian religious philosophy is the sanctification of places. Mount. Kailas, the highest point on our earth, is regarded as the abode of Lord Shiva in Hinduism. This warrants an added reverence to the place besides the instinctual aesthetic appreciation man hold for it. The river *Ganga*, is worshipped as the most sacred of them; it has been proven by the scientists of its natural cleansing effect. But, even before science developed as a detailed field of study, the rishis realized the purity and the purifying quality of the river, the nourishing and sustaining power of the river. Ganga is one of the most important sources of fresh water in India. When people are brought up surrounded in a widespread mindset that hailed the river as Goddess Ganga or the *Ganga devi*, their impulse urges them to safeguard it, so that it could retain forever its pristine eminence.

Even with a brief look into the vast abyss of Indian civilization, its methodologies, religions and myths, it can be easily concluded that, they vouched for the worth of the ecosystem and fought to ensure its prolonged and assured safeguarding. They intended into through the higher way of life, ie. *Ahimsa* or non-violence. *Yajnavalkya Smriti* warns, “the wicked person who kills animals which are protected has to live in hell fire for the days equal to the number of hairs on the body of that animal.” So, they deluged the dominant man’s psyche with blood-curdling images. Undoubtedly chilling, but definitely effective... as it had impinged and invaded the Indian populace for such a long time.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Time and Tide wait for no man. It is as simple as that; and all the more dangerous. The mythological systems constructed by the global heritage have standing records of various catastrophes that they made it through, but barely. Their experiences were transmuted into fanciful accounts of how the various Gods of Earth harvested human life to quench their fury. What they endeavoured to do in the interweaving of their lives experiences was to teach his successive pedigree how to lead symbiotic life with nature, beneficial to both. They associated the natural world to divinity and idolized it as mother; the imposed totems and

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taboos to protect the natural balance. And, this shrewd attempt was rather effective, too, and still persists here and there, but, not to the extent the time needs it to function. In spite of being shrewdly didactic and in spite of how the myths shower the acumen of experiences upon its successors, the power of myths has run its course. What man needs today is not gentle persuasions in the right-direction or even scare-tactics of fantastic characteristics but a direct departure from implicit warnings to explicit threats of impending disaster until it becomes too late and too far in for him to return. In spite of the dwindling eco-conscience, the roots that traditions have left behind; the *Chipko Movement* of 1973 stands as a vibrant testimony to the perennial values that traditions have planted and cultivated in the minds of people.

In the readings of the aforesaid myths, one can trace certain common techniques employed in all of them. The Egyptians, Babylonians and Indians equated the nature to divinity. Nature was idolized as the mother and the supreme force; this perception invoked a reverence to it that warranted worship and devotion to the ecology and not destruction and deformation. While the images of the ever-giving, nurturing mother nature filled our hearts with worship and brought out only reverential behaviour towards nature, but, the terrifying tattles about the all-consuming wrath of the nature gods incite such fears in our hearts, that, one would find it his responsibility to do all he can to prevent the repetition of any such catastrophe the myths recount. The past decade has been witnessing a subtle resurgence of this spirit, with even those communities previously indifferent towards it starting to imbibe the eco-conscience into their ideologies. Perhaps, it is inherent in humanity to pay reverence to what scares him the most. If, fright can induce him to pursue the right path towards a 'green' life, then, nothing is more felicitous than the revival of myths in the modern society. The ancients, be them Egyptians, Babylonian or Indian had the prescience to look out and dictate a sustainable development and accommodating lifestyle, which they coded in fantastic tattles for the posterity to unfold thus.

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