

## ‘ANCESTRAL VOICES PROPHECYING WAR’: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF S. T. COLERIDGE’S KUBLA KHAN

SRIMANTA DAS

Research Scholar, Associated with Haldia Government College, west Bengal, India

### ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism, is a relatively new field of literary studies, but its significance is widespread. Where other fields of literary studies mainly focus on man’s relationship with society, ecocriticism has stretched the boundary to include the entire ecosphere in its periphery. With the increase in the number of natural disasters in the last few decades, rethinking man’s relationship with nature has become extremely important. It has also been acknowledged that, man’s exploitation of nature, for his own benefits is to a great extent responsible for such disasters. Jonathan Bate, one of the major voices, when it comes to analyzing and locating ecological concerns in poetry, is of the opinion that, all educated people are or should be aware of the ecological disasters, that mankind is likely to face in the near future, but it has resulted in little effective action. The role of literature in this context is extremely significant, as it does not merely work at the level of awareness, but at the level of consciousness. Ecocriticism, attempts to study literary texts in a way that reveals the ecological concerns of the respective authors and, for obvious reasons, scholars of the field have found rich material in nineteenth century, Romantic poetry. Romantic poets in general, focus on man’s relationship with nature and how by ignoring it, man digs his own grave. This paper traces how S. T. Coleridge’s Kubla Khan, depicts the alienation of man from nature and warns the readers about the drastic consequences that, such alienation can lead to.

**KEYWORDS:** Ecocriticism, Relationship, Ecological

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s major poem, Kubla Khan, has a discreet message, regarding the preservation of nature. The poem has always been popular among the critics, as a treatise on dreams and imagination, mainly because of the preface that, Coleridge added to his poem to claim that, the work was actually composed in a dream and that it was left unfinished because, he was disturbed by a man from Porlock who engaged him in some business, for over an hour. The preface has resulted in the neglect of some significant areas, that the poem addresses too. Ecocritics have given special importance to Wordsworth’s poetry because, traditionally he has been seen as a keen observer of nature and his poetry, and poetic theories have been instrumental in reviving poetry from the urban concerns and the classicism of the preceding era. Coleridge, on the other hand, has received lesser attention, because of his extremely limited poetic output and his noted interest in imagination, more than any other concrete reason. While this may be just causes, Coleridge, as at least two of his major poems, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ and ‘Kubla Khan’, displays some serious ecological concerns of not just his era, but of all times.

In the absence of the preface, the first thirty six lines of Kubla Khan seem to merely describe Kubla’s ordered domain, decorated with gardens and a ‘pleasure dome’ built to architectural perfection, and the region outside defined by

the presence of hills, the river Alph, forests, and the sea (275). However, a careful reading reveals that, in the 'twice five miles' which is a Kubla's domain, there is an extremely limited presence of Nature (275). The 'fertile ground' is certainly a usable resource, but the poem makes us aware that, it is only going to be used as a site for the building of the 'pleasure dome' and the 'sinuous rills' and 'incense bearing trees', that are merely there for decorative purposes (275). In other words, Kubla's dome possesses aesthetic value. Coleridge, quite interestingly, refuses to comment on the value of the dome and describes it in an extremely economical and matter of fact manner. The language used in the description of Kubla's domain is interesting and worth analyzing. The adjective, 'stately', speaks of nothing apart from the money, that will be spent on building the dome and 'twice five miles', refers to the dimensions of the natural resource that is going to be wasted for Kubla's 'pleasure' (275). The expression, 'girdled round', talks of Kubla's control over nature and mastery over the land, but it also suggests a sense of suffocation, not just for the 'fertile land' which has actually been 'girdled round' but also, I dare say, for the humans inside Kubla's domain (275). The dimensions of the land may apparently be quite impressive in terms of size, but the 'walls and towers' and also the closed 'dome' may connote a prison (275). The only vegetation-the 'incense bearing trees'- that is present in the garden offers sensuous pleasure, but no nourishment (275). In the scheme of the poem Coleridge may be suggesting that, even the fertility of the land has been constrained by girdling it.

Beyond Kubla's domain, there are forests 'ancient as the hills', which gives us an idea that, the building of the dome has involved deforestation (275). There is little reason to think that, such a huge clear area can exist in such a dense forest region. The cable's decision to build a dome is therefore, an act against nature and a poet with ecological concerns cannot be expected to show any empathy towards him. A cable may be unaware of the fact that, his action has caused any damage to nature, but that cannot lessen the intensity of his crime. Kubla, being the monarch, is supposed to be, according to human perception at least, the master of both man and nature, but he shows little responsibility when it comes to preserving the nature of his kingdom. What he does is ruthless and, I dare say, meaningless exploitation.

Once the speaker's eyes move beyond the twice five miles of Kubla's domain, he exclaims-"But oh! That deep romantic chasm..."- which proclaims in a loud voice and the speaker's fascination with the scenery outside (276). The word 'romantic' is rarely used by the Romantic poets themselves and in this poem; it conveys a range of ideas, which are quite different from what scholars of Romanticism have associated to the term. It is important to note that, the word is used as an adjective synonymous with splendid, majestic, great, and even free. Cables domain is the artificial man made world, which has been created by demolishing nature and Coleridge uses the adjective-'stately'-to describe it. The adjective, 'romantic', can be read as the opposite of 'stately'. If the 'stately pleasure dome' is the central feature of Kubla's domain, then the 'deep romantic chasm' is the dominant feature of the world outside. Within a Kubla's domain, both man and nature are constrained by Kubla's rule and in the world outside nature is free and wild, and man is barbaric with unleashed passions and emotions. The phrase- 'demon-lover'- suggests barbarism, and may hold some interest for post-colonial critics, but, in the scheme of the poem, there is little reason to think that, Coleridge uses the phrase in a negative sense (276). We must keep in mind that, as a poet with ecological concerns, Coleridge's criticism is targeted at Kubla Khan, and not at the tribal woman or her lover. Such human beings live in close association with nature and most importantly, without causing any serious damage to it. Coleridge, who was also a noted abolitionist, had always treated such races with respect and utmost sympathy. His lecture, On the Slave Trade, bears testimony to the fact that, he was against the colonial machinery that treated Africans as lesser human beings and who were sold and bought for the profit of the Europeans. In

the lecture, Coleridge criticizes; his fellow beings for growing so materialistic and succumbing to imaginary pleasures. He says, "Whence arises our Miseries? Whence arises our Vices? From imaginary Wants..." (Coleridge 130). He even quotes apart from his Religious Musings in the lecture, to drive home the point that imaginary wants lead to the desire, for unnecessary pleasures:

Hence, the soft Couch, and many-colour'd Robe

The Timbrel and arch'd Dome and costly Feast (qtd. In Coleridge 131)

Kubla Khan, in a way, is like the Europeans who have succumbed to the imaginary wants. His dome may have some aesthetic value, but, apart from pleasure, it can offer nothing. In other words, the dome has only caused wastage of natural resources. In Religious Musings, he says:

With all the inventive Arts that nurse the Soul

Two forms of Beauty; and by sensual want

Unsensualize the mind, which in the Means

Learns to forget the grossness of the End... (qtd. In Coleridge 131)

If the building of the pleasure dome is the main action of the initial part of the poem, the birth of River Alph dominates the latter part; while making its way to the surface, it tears apart layers of earth:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,

As if this earth in fast thick pants was breathing,

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:

Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,

Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:

And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever

It flung up momentarily the sacred river. (276)

The image suggests destruction and creation at the same time. The river may destroy the earth's surface, but its birth is important because, it sustains life. Coleridge seems to be implying that, there is a creative element, even in natural destructive processes. If Shelley celebrates the might of the storm by calling it "Destroyer and preserver" in his celebrated lyric, Ode to the West Wind, it is for the same reason (339). Coleridge calls it the 'sacred river', not just to add a supernatural flavor to his description, but because of the sheer fact that, rivers sustain human civilizations and animal and plant life as well (276). This particular image of destruction is quite different from the way Kubla destroys nature. In Kubla's case, the destruction will yield no benefit for the human race, or the natural world, but the River Alph's birth will nourish all forms of life.

The imagery suggests penetration of the feminine land and also the human birth process. But it is not just the

description that is important in the scheme of the poem. The River Alph destroys the earth at the moment of its birth and the site of its birth is unpredictable for human beings. Coleridge suggests that, when he says that River Alph runs through ‘caverns measureless to man’ (275). If the site of the sacred river’s birth is beyond human comprehension, then it is sheer accident that, it chooses the chasm for pushing through the layers of the earth, for coming up to the surface. An accident is, after all, an incident that occurs without human beings being able to foresee or predict it. The most interesting part of the poem is the fact that, the river bears so near Kubla’s domain. It usually flows through underground caverns and makes its way to the surface at whatever site it chooses. The underground movements of the river are beyond Kubla’s comprehension and the little distance between his domain and the site of the river’s birth only means that, his dome is at threat. If the fountain can tear through the earth’s crust, the fate of the dome is not beyond imagination, if the river ever chooses to come to the surface through the area Kubla has marked as his domain. This conveys that, Kubla or any man for that matter, is not the master of nature. In that case Kubla’s dominion over nature is merely egotistical. Nature, symbolized by River Alph, can destroy, but it can also sustain. Natural phenomena are not dependent on the choices or will of human beings. In the scheme of the poem, however, Kubla is quite unaware of the threat from nature. He has built ‘walls and towers’, as a precautionary measure against human enemies, but he can do very little to prevent nature from invading his domain (275).

Historically, Kublai Khan was the grandchild of Genghis Khan and his ancestors were the great Mongols, for whom war was a vocation. His lineage is, however, one major reason that makes us misread the line- “Ancestral voices prophesying war” (276). Mongol ancestors warning Kubla Khan, about an impending war seems to just add an Oriental flavor to the poem. But, we must remember that, in Coleridge’s poem, Kubla Khan is not the legendary Chinese monarch with Mongolian lineage, but a representative of human beings who are destroying nature for their own imaginary wants. In the context of Kubla’s ancestors, it is interesting to take note of the following lines from *Religious Musings*:

Contemplate Spirits! Yeah, that hovers o'er  
 With untired gaze the immeasurable fount  
 Ebullient with creative Deity! (1)

The fact that spirits have access to knowledge, that is far superior than what human beings are capable of comprehending, is an idea that dominates Coleridge’s *Religious Musings*. Kubla Khan is not a Christian poem like *Religious Musings* but, as a poem composed in a dream, it does not claim to be realistic either. The ancestors, being dead, can be compared with the spirits who possess superior knowledge. They know that, Kubla’s dome is at threat and the impending war they are referring to is not a human affair, but a natural disaster. This can be testified by the fact that, a human threat is well within Kubla’s awareness and by building walls and towers, he has attempted to ascertain his security. The only threat that is unknown to him is from nature. As it is the final line of the vision, we are not sure whether Kubla is able to interpret it correctly or not. Probably, he will fail because of his alienation from Nature. Coleridge seems to be saying that, this unawareness of nature will cost the human civilization dearly. Busy in pursuits, that are causing damage to the environment, mankind is ignorant of the destruction awaiting it. The question that naturally rises is, whether Kubla is equipped to do anything, even if he becomes aware of the threat. The river will always be beyond his control. The only thing that he can do in that case is, probably, not build the dome.

In the light of the above argument, it will not be wrong to consider Kubla Khan as a warning poem, for human beings from the ecological perspective. Man has been wasting natural resources for something, without which he will not

lead a lesser life. Coleridge argues in the same manner, while talking against slave trade in his lecture. On the Slave Trade, he says that, the British and other colonial countries will not lead a less comfortable life, without colonial products like rum and sugar. Mankind will lose nothing, if Kubla does not build the dome. The fertile ground can offer better benefits, if it is not sacrificed at the altar of pleasure, that nature must be preserved and exploitation of natural resources can have drastic consequences are the messages, that Coleridge wants to convey to the readers. Unless such exploitative activities are stopped, mankind will always be subject to threats from nature. However, Kubla and mankind's ignorance and Coleridge's knowledge of the same, assigns a special place to the poet in the scheme of the poem. In the poem, Kubla cannot be made aware of the danger. But, by writing the poem, Coleridge is attempting to make his readers conscious of the effects of alienation from nature. In other words, he is trying to save mankind from the irreparable damage, that nature can cause. If he is asking his readers to celebrate the poet at the end of the poem; it is because, only men with such creative powers can help to spread the awareness, regarding natural phenomena. A poet is a better and more mature artist than Kubla, because of the sheer fact that, he is conscious of and not alienated from nature. Jonathan Bate, in *The Song of the Earth*, asks, "What are poets for?" (243) and argues that, the purpose of poetry is not add ornaments to life and culture, while remaining oblivious of the rather threatening reality, all around. In that case, the worth of a poet or a literary work will not be much different from Kubla's dome. He attempts to assign a much more serious function to poets. The function, Bate assigns to poets, is not merely to make people aware. Most educated people, he knows, are actually aware. In the twenty first century, there are few amongst the literate, who do not know about the melting ice of the poles, or the leakage in the ozone sphere, or the fresh water bodies drying up, or the oxygen crisis caused by deforestation. Just awareness is of little use, because very little remedial action springs from it. According to Bate, poets must help to reshape human consciousness and only that can lead to some fruitful action (23). Coleridge wrote 'Kubla Khan', much before Bate's birth but it is beyond doubt that, in the poem, he has expressed his belief that, only poets can save the environment. A poet is way superior to Kubla Khan because, the former is not interested in creating aesthetically valuable works only; he is capable of altering human consciousness, regarding nature.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2000. Print.
2. Coleridge, S. T. "Kubla Khan". *Fifteen Poets*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2002. Print.
3. Coleridge, S. T. "On the Slave Trade". *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. UK: Princeton University Press. 1990. Print.
4. Coleridge, S. T. "Religious Musings". poemhunter.com. Web 17 May. 2017.
5. Shelley, P. B. "Ode to the West Wind". *Fifteen Poets*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2002. Print.

