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Stephen Gill's Selected Poems: An Eco-Critical Study

Rajkumar Bera
Research Scholar,
Ravenshaw University.

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Abstract:

Eco-criticism is a general study of literature from the environmental point of view. It attempts to make coherence between man and nature. Stephen Gill's poems are subdued with the environmental spirit and concerned with earth, the environment and nature. His poems are an indirect critique towards his contemporary societal atmosphere showing the mental dilemma and crisis of the common men through nature's sympathetic and antipathetic approaches. However, the poems of Stephen Gill show an interdisciplinary relationship between man and nature.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Dilemma, Crisis, Interdisciplinary.

Eco-Criticism is the study of literature from an ecological or environmental perspective. It is the study of environmental texts from any critical perspective or the application of various environmental lenses to any kind of texts.

William Rueckert may have been the first person to use the term eco-criticism. Rueckert published an essay titled "Literature and Ecology". "An Experiment in Eco-Criticism" (1978) in which he focuses on 'the application of ecology and ecological concepts' to the study of literature.

Cheryll Glotfelty's working definition in "The Eco-criticism Reader" is that eco-criticism is the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment and one of the implicit goal of the approach is to regain professional dignity for the undervalued genre of nature writing. Eco-criticism is viewed as a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories) that is in some way related with the human relationship to the natural world.

Eco-criticism is interdisciplinary. In order to understand the connectedness of things – including the life of mind and the life of earth – one must reconnect the disciplines that have become sundered through over specialization. Inherent in the idea of interdisciplinary is the holistic ideal. All eco – critical efforts are pieces of a comprehensive continuum. Eco-critics, therefore, encourage others to think seriously about the relationship of humans and nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implication.

An Eco-critical reading of Gill's poems suggest that there is an underpinning concern for the earth, the environment and the nature. Stephen Gill is very much prophetic in this

regard. What is striking in his poems is the passage in which he reveals he is more of a prophet with a mission. He envisages, "In order to achieve something meaningful; particularly in the field of creative arts, including singing, dancing, writing speaking, one needs some power behind. To attract that power, one should depend on one's own power first. One should not ignore external powers" Gill derives this power by considering him as an integral part of a holistic nature that is responsible for maintaining ecological equilibrium.

Stephen Gill's awareness of the environment can be observed even in his Songs Before Shrine. In the poem "When I see" the poet sharply points out the disruption between nature and man-made environment. He writes:

"When I see
The blades of grass growing
trees leafing
birds awaking us
I think of
the mounting cries."

The poet sees growth as an organic process whereas in sharp contrast to the natural growth that is progressive, finds human beings subsumed by woes taking regressive steps. Environmental pollution is the major culprit in his subsequent observation:

"When I see
People jogging at ease
heading towards the beach
searching clean, fresh air
polluting smogged sights".

Here, the poet's scathing criticism goes towards the human beings who always search for the advantages out of nature but remain unable to maintain the perpetual balance in natural atmosphere.

The elements of nature are in general well integrated and merge with each other effortlessly. But wherever they come in close contact with the disruptive human influence,



they are too contaminated. In the Snowflakes, Gills uses the image of ‘snowflakes’ to exemplify this notion. The same snowflakes when likened to a dove are soft and gentle but when the compassion is extended to human beings, they become hard and slippery. He writes:

“As feathers of a dove
Soft and sulky
Snowflakes fall.
With nature’s gentle hands
they shroud
the vastness of the evening.
These dews of indifference
descend to the trees
slanted roofs
deserted roads
and windy paths
As a human heart
they would grow
Slippery and hard
With men and beasts
Stamp to them.

Functionally, Stephen Gill’s eco concerns are worked out in his poems at two levels. At the first level, as it is evident from the discussion on “Snowflakes”, he makes use of figures of speech, particularly simile and metaphor. At the second level, he makes a direct address to nature. In “Wind” for instances, he envies it for its ‘unfamed’, ‘unbound’ freedom. Nonetheless, it reveals to him the constricted life of humanity. He admires the wind in the following lines:

“You rage

you smile
you cry
depending on your moods
How lucky you are!
Any shape you wish
you assume
Unlike humans
you are free”

Similarly, Gill's "A Breeze that is free" also associates liberty with the elements of nature. Yet the poet wishes to use breeze to fresh up the intellectual mind that is suffocated with contaminating thoughts. In this poem, the poet expounds his free will on the basis of which the poet likes to work everywhere, especially in composition of verse which outlets his pen-up feelings as naturally as the leaves come to the trees. Hence he desires to act like a breeze:

“If I were a breeze
I should lull the learned
to bar the door of his thinking
from breeding substances
that pollute our planet
and fill him with a treasure
that is possessed by the fields
filled with trees”

A replacement of the dry but corrupting intellect with ecosphere would lead to sustainable development that can enliven human beings and their surroundings. In similar vein, the poem "Enigma" juxtaposes the natural with the synthetic and leaves the choice to mankind. The first stanza begins with an Edenic, idyllic, prelapsarian setting:

“On the one side
I smell



the delicious odor of pleasing sights
of the lakes of fresher water
plunging spectacular cliffs
and a field
With smiling flower
And butterflies”

In Peter Barry’s description of the “Outdoor environment”, this picture clearly falls under the classification of “The Scenic Sublime”(e.g forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfall) (255). This scenic sublime is contrasted with a postlapsarian, artificial atmosphere in the following stanza as Gill mentions:

“On the other
I see
an island seduced by technology
where a kite is trying to fly”

Nature is seen as a free being living for its own sake and expressing its own desires in an unrestrained, unconditional manner. In “Me”, Gill uses the image of water to represent this:

“I want to express myself
drink my own water
flow in my own way
live in me.”

The poet reiterates this view firmly in the poem, “Who Shall Buy”. The malignities of nature such as “The Warmth of the Valleys”, the poet sharply comments, cannot be commodified. He spells out this idea in the following lines:

“NO one can buy
not freedom of the winds
The grace of the lakes

the dignity of the palm trees
the mastery of the oceans
the sobriety of the jungles
and the songs of the seasons”

He further points out the symbiotic and homogeneous relationship that exists between nature and man and the surrounding universe in these lines:

“No one can buy
Nor sell
the fragrance of flowers
which is a friend of the universe;
and the interdependence
of all animals, nations and nature
who from a family with humans
and who breathe the same air
under the same canopy.”

“Image of Flower” is a very interesting poem as it brings out Gill’s eco concerns. The poet contradicts at the Biblical view of human genesis that God created man in his image and proceeds to declare:

“Human were carved
in the image of flowers.”

Gill indicates that the theory of human genesis from God’s own image is anthropomorphic, while his insight of human beings originating from nature (flowers) emphasizes his belief that human beings are part of eco-cycle. However, the technological progress made by human beings is symbolically represented when the poet says:

“Human made wings
to sail above the rainbow clouds and created



their own plastic roses and jasmines

without roots.”

In “Garden of Eden” Gill sees the protective power of ‘Mother Earth’ as more powerful than the divine land. Because it sympathises with the exiled human beings and gives them refuge.

“When Adam and eve broke the spectre of the divine land

they were chased out from there

only mother earth gave them refuge.”

In “The Flowers of the Universe” Gill communicates his eco-concern in a figurative sense. He pictures a persona who overpowered by possessiveness, crushes “The flowers”. However appalled by a bleak vision of a chaotic human crowd/ under the darkening dust / of war, hatred and illusion” inside the stem, the persona attempts to reshape the flower with the realization that the flower needs “the soft nurse of nature / and a mysterious rain”.

Stephen Gill continues to express his eco concerns even in the recently published *Flashes* (2007). Although they are written in the Japanese condensed Haikuan spirit, they are pithy and even more effective. Especially, the poems written under social concern carry forward the earlier ecomotives. The following poem juxtaposes the freshness of nature with the decomposed culture:

“Morning mist

above the city graveyard

noises grow”

But soon the poet appears to be a bit pessimistic when he mourns because mankind that should serve and safeguard nature has gone against it and contributes to its annihilation. The anguish is felt when he speculates:

“Gardeners trample flowers

Who will feed birds

future ravaged”

Ironically, the gardeners who are supposed to look after flowers endanger them. This is a clear warning of ecological disorder, as birds could not be fed by nature which would subsequently devastate future livelihood

Gill also laments for the world lost in co-modified images that are enhanced by media and influenced by capitalist manoeuvres. On the one hand people are not interested in deriving pleasure out of watching greenery. On the other hand, they have already lost their abilities to derive pleasures by experiencing nature directly and their senses are so numbered that even televised pictures of wasteland charm them. Nevertheless, when the poet has lost hope of redeeming mankind, he trusts that nature will resort to its own methods of survival. In this respect, he is inclined to believe that the plants and other objects of ecosphere have a unified breathing consciousness.

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