

# The Triumvirate of Art, Nature and Man: Ecoaesthetics beyond Geocritical Frames

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## Abstract

The dialectics on ecology has brought forth many alterations in the field of art. Ecoaesthetics is a fresh discipline which has evolved to address the ecological issues through an aesthetics of engagement by highlighting the spiritual interconnectedness among the triumvirate: Art, Nature and Man. The article analyses two poems of the same title, *The Floating Island*, written by Dorothy Wordsworth in the nineteenth century and Mamang Dai in the twenty first century, to highlight how the relationship among the triumvirate was perceived in the two centuries. Finally, it unveils how Ecoaesthetics goes beyond the Geocritical frame to usher in a biocentric revolution, subverting the anthropocentric view, by creating an ecological awareness, which is made possible by the interconnectedness that exists among the triumvirate.

**Keywords:** Biocentric; Ecoaesthetics; Ecological ethics; Geocriticism; Interconnectedness.

The discourse on environment, ecology and ecosystem has branched out in various dimensions, and its resonance is felt even in the realm of art and aesthetics. New philosophies, theories and practices have sprouted enriching the literary domain. Ecoaesthetics is a fresh discipline which has evolved to address the ecological issues through an aesthetics of engagement by highlighting the spiritual interconnectedness among the triumvirate: Art, Nature and Man. It highlights the biocentric notion which treats all organisms with equal importance negating the anthropocentric notion which is centred on man. Ecoaesthetics goes beyond geocriticism— which is centred on land: the practice of pinning down the real place through its imaginary representations in various texts—to propound a philosophy of interconnectedness. As Abhinavagupta says, “Sarvam Sarvatmakam – Everything consists of everything else” (136). It is this interconnectedness

that forms the basis of all real aesthetic ventures. The realization—that the entire world is an entity with varied pockets of pulsations: the multitude of organisms both living and non-living, throbbing in differentiating frequencies, yet intertwined by an invisible invincible network—will transform one from a mere spectator to an artist, capable of translating the mysteries of the universe to the common man. The aesthetics on Nature/Ecology is founded on such a theoretical paradigm where the definition of a work of art itself has changed: from a representation to the represented whereby art becomes one with the thing it represents, eluding the border in-between.

Ecoaesthetics initiates a new perspective of art: “a paradigm shift from the idea of representation to a process of continual transformation that would have allowed art to become part of living processes of productivity of the land itself as well as its inhabitants” (Araeen682). Art, thereby, goes beyond representation and evolves by metamorphosis, reincarnating the spirit of the Land/Nature as well as the inhabitants which it represents; offering scope for the geocritical practice of studying the real places in Nature—the landscape and the humanscape—through its imaginary representations in texts. At this juncture the philosophy of ecoaesthetics meets with the practice of geocriticism.

This article attempts to highlight the erasure of borders that separates Art, Nature/Land and Man—which forms an essential principle of ecoaesthetics and also probes the geocritical practice of how Art represents, and helps in studying, the Land/Nature which encompasses both the landscape and the humanscape. When ecoaesthetics merges with geocriticism, the trinity of Art, Nature/Land and Man evolves; where Nature offers the resource and raw material for the Man who creates the Art, which is truly the essence of himself and the Nature making the three inseparable. An analysis of Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Floating Island* (1829) and Mamang Dai’s poem (2010) of the same title will help understand how the relationship that exists among Nature, Man and Art has been perceived in the nineteenth and the twenty first century respectively. Since the terrain of both the poems are unnamed floating islands, the geographical features that distinguishes them will be minimal, which helps one concentrate more on the relationship among the trinity in the two centuries.

Dorothy describes how “Harmonious Powers” (1) work along with Nature upon all the elements: the sky, the earth, the lake, the river, and the sea. The sunshine, the storm, the whirlwind and the breeze in unison perform dutifully the task entrusted to them. The speaker of the poem then draws

the attention of the readers to a floating island, which withstood the action of the waves for a long time and finally gave in for some mysterious reason.

... a slip of earth,  
 By throbbing waves long undermined,  
 Loosed from its hold; – *how* no one knew. (5-7)

It floated obediently with the wind along with its trees and the warbling birds. It is portrayed as a self-sufficient entity: replete with food, shelter and safety for the inhabiting creatures.

There berries ripen, flowerets bloom;  
 There insects live their lives – and die:  
 A peopled *world* it is; in size a tiny room. (14-16)

The speaker then gives warning about time's winged chariot, which approaches initiating the cyclical course of Nature.

And thus through many seasons' space  
 This little Island may survive  
 But Nature, though we mark her not,  
 Will take away – may cease to give. (17-20)

In Nature/land everything has a stipulated task or function, once it is fulfilled it may cease to exist giving way to newer lives.

Buried beneath the glittering Lake!  
 Its place no longer to be found,  
 Yet the lost fragments shall remain,  
 To fertilize some other ground. (25-28)

The poem reveals the cyclical way in which Nature sustains life. The adjective "harmonious" brings in the very rhythm of existence. The island which is a microcosm of the world seems to enjoy its freedom from the limitations of life. Nurturing all the organisms within its fold; it floats with

the wind of time through different seasons and obediently succumbs to the ravishes of Nature making itself a fertile field for future life. The poet points out the transience of all natural things. In Nature everything, after finishing its assigned function, would give way for lives anew. The island which is itself a self-sustaining ecosystem is a miniature Nature. The interconnectedness of the organisms within the island with the various manifestations of Nature offer a glimpse of the essential life processes. The floating island on a wider philosophical plane may stand for the freedom loving human being who frees himself from his mother's womb, like the island that is loosed from its bonding with the rest of the land. The floating island can also be seen as the art, here the poem, which once floated within the mind of the poet or the artist; peopled with so many organismic ideas, which finally got liberated as a full-fledged poem. Dorothy Wordsworth, like her brother William Wordsworth, loved to live in the lap of Mother Nature and found bliss in her oneness with Nature. Her art had its perfection in this oneness, where her own self merged with the Nature resulting in the creation of soulful poems. The *Floating Island* for her is her own self, her art and the slip of earth that she sees, all rolled into one. Here Art, Man /Poet and Nature merges to one entity.

Mamang Dai's poem has the floating island as the speaker and it feels that the mountain is trying to retain it by stretching down into the water where it (the island) lies. The readers could visualise the image of the mountain reflected in the water. The island imagines that the mountain does not want it to sever away from its foot, instead it yearns to pamper the island on its shoulders like a baby.

Deep in my centre a woman is asleep  
pressing her cheek on my pillow  
vivid with dreams. The birds of summer  
are nesting in her breast.  
(5-8)

The island identifies itself with the soul of a woman who cherishes dreams of freedom in her mind. The image of "the birds of summer" (8) highlights how she, like them, yearns to migrate to a faraway place. Here the island becomes one with the woman: eroding the barrier between Nature and Man. The floating island, as in Dorothy Wordsworth's poem, is anxious about the current of time: not sure about what future has in store; "Who knows which way the spinning current will spin" (9). The island bids good bye to the mountain which is blind to its anxieties. It feels that the mountain is beyond its reach, "pasted to the sky" (10).

when the day is folded away

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my heart clings to the life of water.  
 Into the deep, into the sea green  
 navigating on a heartbeat,  
 the lilies are shooting up like swordfish  
 and the woman is laughing, laughing. (11-16)

The island feels one with the life of water as it floats into the deep sea with an enthusiastic throbbing heart. The image of the lilies represents the innocence/purity and rebirth of the island/ woman, to a new life free of shackles. The swordfish symbolises the passion and courage of the island/ woman for the new adventurous life. The endless laugh of the woman, with which the poem ends, is a reaffirmation of her oneness with the soul of the island and the water. The poem, thus offers the philosophy of interconnectedness where the island, the woman and water seems to be bound into one entity: one seen within the others; land, water, and 'spirit' in the form of woman: all rolled into one life.

Dorothy Wordsworth sees the island from the perspective of an enlightened sage and hence her poem has an intense philosophical outlook, one that toes the line of fate or destiny; whereas Mamang Dai's poem is more radical, catering more to the notion of freedom and individuality. However, the two poems have one common theme: spiritual interconnectedness. Like Dorothy's floating island, Mamang Dai's island too is a reflection of both her art and her 'self'. The woman that lies within the soul of the island is none other than the poet herself with her dreams of freedom, yearning to be one with the water that once surrounded her in her mother's womb and is now beckoning her with open arms to embrace her in its immortal bliss, to be one with Nature: back to the womb of Mother Nature. The cyclical nature of life is re-emphasised in both the poems.

The two poems discussed here, though written in two different centuries – nineteenth and twenty first respectively – highlight the same philosophical notion of interconnectedness among the organisms themselves and that with the Nature. Any aberration from this interconnectedness would disrupt the entire ecological as well as the spiritual balance. The poems, in alliance with the geocritical practice, also give thumbnail sketches of the landscape and the life it supports thereby offering a vivid picture of the terrain. But, the underlying philosophy of interconnectedness propounded by ecoaesthetics that is highlighted in both the poems goes beyond the geocritical practice – of pinning down the referent/ the real place (here island) on Earth from the descriptions given in the 'text' of the two poems – to offer a message of oneness. Hence the poems under analysis avoid any

placial names or peculiar geographical features. This re-emphasises the universality of the relationship that exists among Art, Nature/Land and Man going beyond the geocritical paradigm of fixing the particular place. Ecoaesthetics, thus goes beyond the geocritical framework to usher in a biocentric revolution, subverting the anthropocentric view, by creating an ecological awareness, which is made possible by the interconnectedness that exists among the triumvirate. Though the title is 'floating island', the two poems reveal the essential rootedness or "bondedness" of things. What Raimon Panikkar said about the trinity of Nature, God and Man in his *The Cosmotheandric Experience* can be extended to the triad of Nature, Art and Man. "They are parts because they are not the whole but they are not parts which can be 'parted' from the whole without thereby ceasing to exist... They are constitutive dimensions of the whole, which permeates everything that is and is not reducible to any of its constituents" (60). The three elements or factors are mutually dependent and at the same time overlapping. They form a palimpsest by superimposing one upon the other their varied features of existence.

The essential oneness of Man, Nature and Art highlights the need to preserve them all. It gives a clarion call to sustain this bond which humans are trying to disturb by their foolish deeds. Rasheed Araeen in his work on ecoaesthetics argues, "Only when people are in a position to use their own creative potentials, which can be enhanced by an artistic imagination, will a change occur.... An artistic imagination can in fact help ... and it should in fact lay the foundation for a radical manifesto of art for the twenty-first century" (683).

Art in whatever form it takes – poems, paintings, fiction and so on – should not be for its sake alone but for the greater well-being of the world at large. It has a social function and has the immense potential to bring about sweeping change in the way people perceive things. As Herber Marcuse says, "art can contribute to changing the consciousness ... of the men and women who could change the world" (32).

Ecoaesthetics, by erasing the borders among Art, Man and Nature, evolves to address the issues related to Nature through the artistic creation of Man. It, thus distances itself from the traditional aesthetics which perceived Art, Nature and Man as mutually exclusive, separate entities that catered only to mere objectification rather than revealing the interconnectedness. Xiangzhan Cheng argues, "Only through an aesthetics of engagement ... can an intimate relationship between humans and the world [Nature] be established, through which to experience the interconnectedness of all life

explained by ecology and deep ecology” (224). The relationship among Art, Man and Nature need to be stabilized for such a biocentric revolution where Nature inspires Man to create Art which in turn creates a consciousness that preserve the bonds among the three. Art imitates or re-presents the real as propounded by the theory of imitation and representation in art. Through such re-creations the artist highlights the interconnectedness of organisms which aesthetically evokes a positive response in the reader/spectator. Art thus creates an ecological awareness which would further frame an ecological ethics that surpasses the anthropocentric view to endorse a biocentric one: one which ushers in a harmony of being. As Raimon Panikkar in *The Rhythm of Being* argues, “Being is rhythmic, rhythm is harmony, harmony brings peace and joy” (54). Dorothy Wordsworth in the nineteenth century and Mamang Dai in the twenty first century highlights this harmony that exists among the triumvirate. Art, Man and Nature together have the power to create and sustain a world: where every organism has its space and value, where everything is related to and sustained by everything else, where life is an eternal river of spiritually interconnected beings bound forever by the law of Nature alone.

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