

## **Questioning the Notion of Speciesism in Select Poems of Peter Reading's *Faunal***

*Neha Chatterjee*

### **Abstract**

Eco-criticism, as a word, traces back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" and apparently lay dormant in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting where Cheryl Glotfelty used it to substitute the idea of nature study by the study of relationship between literature and physical environment. Nature is often constructed and perceived as we human want to create and portray it where human is taken to be the cardinal point and nature, the periphery of concern. The idea of eco-criticism with a covert apocalyptic view tends to centralize nature as the essential entity of survival. Speciesism, as an idea was first introduced by Richard D. Ryder, and popularized by the Australian philosopher, Peter Singer, in his book *Animal Liberation* which defines it as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species." This paper intends to analyze select poems of Peter Reading's *Faunal* to dig out the discrepancies in the idea of eco-criticism and deep ecology by using the concept of speciesism. Neither human nor animal are more important than each other. Both are equally endangered and threatened in the deteriorating conditions of environment because they are equally dependent on each other for growth and survival. Reading's poems try to articulate this equality between human and nonhuman where all needs to be saved from the upcoming odds.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism; deep ecology; ecosophy; speciesism; anthropocentric; eco-centric.

Ecocriticism, as a word, traces back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" and apparently lay dormant in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting where Cheryll Glotfelty used it to substitute the idea of nature study by the relationship between literature and physical environment. Nature is often constructed and perceived as we human want to create and describe it where human is taken to be the cardinal point and nature, the periphery of concern. The idea of eco-criticism with a covert apocalyptic view tends to centralize nature as the important entity of survival. Speciesism, as an idea was first introduced by Richard D. Ryder, and popularized by the Australian philosopher, Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation* which defines it as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species." This paper intends to analyze select poems of Peter Reading's *Faunal* to dig out the discrepancies in the idea of eco-criticism and deep ecology by using the concept of speciesism.

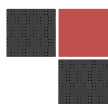
The dialectics between human and nature is always in a process of permanence and change and this dialogue between them "allows us to reflect upon the literary or cultural text in the context of the slow evolution of the biosphere" (Coupe 6). The growing field of theory of ecocriticism takes into account the threat of catastrophe against the human world because human are as much a part of nature as the green world is. It is often suggested that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is marked as the beginning of modern environmental writing and it eventually fuels the field of ecocriticism as a whole. The movement has first started by American writers and theorists. Peter Barry points out that officially the word ecocriticism has been first used by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: A Experiment in Ecocriticism" and the word 'ecological' is first used in Karl Kroeber's 1974 article "Home at Grasmere." The British side of the movement has started with Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) and Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991).

Environmentalism as a movement has first taken its speed with the publication of *The Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson where she points out how "there was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings" (1). But these agrarian and natural harmonies are now disturbed and damaged by indiscriminate human activities and scientific interventions. The catastrophe is described by Carson as:

... a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community; mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; ... Everywhere was a shadow of Death. (2)

The apocalyptic vision of the environmentalists has put forward that the spell of industrialization and scientific inventions has disturbed the harmony between nature and human. When literary writers rhetorically organize the vision of the environmentalists with their expertise, it mainly highlights the degenerating condition of nature and human as a whole. The apprehension of the apocalypse due to this entire process of degenerating relationship between nature and human and its representation in literature has led to the formation of the field of ecocriticism.

In the 'Introduction' to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as:



... the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty xix)

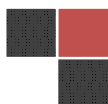
Glotfelty rightly observes that though in broad spectrum of research and multifarious layers of modernization, each and every ecological study begins at the fundamental and crucial premise of how human, with its varied culture and development, are connected to the natural world, thereby affecting it and getting affected by it. Eco-criticism, as a discipline of study, encompasses the wide interconnections and interactions between nature and human social culture, specifically the cultural, social and political artifacts of language and literature. Critically and theoretically, it both touches literature and literary representations and negotiates between the human and the nonhuman; culture and nature. She further argues that eco-criticism inflates the notion of "the world" to incorporate the entire ecosphere. She places the idea of Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, that is, everything is connected to everything else, and consequently literature is also as much related to the material world. Literature does not represent or reflect the ethereal or aesthetic completely dissociated from the complex global fabric, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact. Her central outlook was to find out how nature or environment is represented in literature.

Greg Garrard, one of the eminent theoreticians of eco-criticism, commences his book *Ecocriticism* with an apocalyptic view, first pointed out by Rachel Carson in her book, *The Silent Spring*, of the destruction and demolition of the pastoral due to the excessive usage of modern techniques and equipment. Based on the idea of Jonathan Bate and Carl Kroeber, he has tried to conceptualize the idea of pastoral which has disappeared from the human civilization and diminished by the onset of industrialization. He acknowledges the poets like Wordsworth and Shelley whose arguments were radical in presentation of pastoral where they have pitted their radical standpoint about pastoral against the rapid growth of industry.

George Sessions edited book, *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, questions the early environmentalist like Barry Commoner as anthropocentric in nature, that is, environment for human's sake. Arne Naess has first coined the term deep ecology to highlight the impending dangers caused due to anthropocentric views and destruction of natural world for fulfilling the wants of industrialization. Garrard rightly says that:

Deep Ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only toward all members of the ecosphere, but even toward all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. (24)

George Sessions's 1982 interview with Arne Naess - "Simple in Means, Rich in Ends" - provides a pertinent introduction to the cardinal ideas of deep ecology. Naess demonstrates that the essence of deep ecology is to ask deeper and critical questions which leads to questioning the values and cultures of human society, and to the total process of industrialization and modernization. He points out his ideas about the norms of ecological equality and self-realization. Deep ecology tries to create a self-realization and deeper concern about ecological crisis thereby forming an eco-centric view which is intensely related to nature, that is, nature for nature's sake. He even advices to embrace



those religions which philosophizes the close connectedness with nature, instead of, Christianity. George Sessions says that:

The philosophy of the Deep Ecology movement is characterized essentially by ecocentrism, as outlined in the 1984 Deep Ecology platform. For critics such as Bookchin and Gore to substantiate their claims that the Deep Ecology position is inherently misanthropic, they would have to show that eco-centrism is essentially misanthropic. (Sessions xiii)

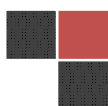
The eight points of deep ecology platform intends to reject anthropocentrism where they believe in flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth having value in them. They opined humans have no right to reduce the richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. The flourishing of human life and cultures should be compatible with a substantial decrease in human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening the condition of nature as a whole.

Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation* points out that the factors and conditions that dismantle to arouse public concern about animals is the hardest and difficult to overcome because of the assumption that "human beings come first" and that any problem about animals is not comparable to the problems about humans, both socially and morally. It is an indication of speciesism. Singer asks, "How can anyone who has not made a thorough study of the topic possibly know that the problem is less serious than problems of human suffering?" (219). Diminishing the importance of animal suffering and assuming that animals really do not matter, however much they suffer, their suffering is less important than the suffering of human is speciesism. He says:

But pain is pain, and the importance of preventing unnecessary pain and suffering does not diminish because the being that suffers is not a member of our species. What would we think of someone who said that "whites come first" and that therefore poverty in Africa does not pose as serious a problem as poverty in Europe? (220)

He yearns of equality among everyone despite of any differences in situation, condition or anything else.

According to Peter Singer, the idea of human superiority over other nonhuman components is an excuse for not doing anything about either human or nonhuman animals as a genuine choice between incompatible alternatives. Incompatibility lives in my mind. Though everyone has a limited amount of time and energy, and time actively used in work for one cause lessens the time available for another cause, there is nothing to stop those who expend their time and energy to human problems from joining the boycott of the products of "agribusiness cruelty." Peter Singer advises to be a vegetarian instead of eating flesh because the well-being of human beings depends on preservation of our environment and becoming vegetarians will increase the amount of grain available to feed people elsewhere thereby reducing pollution, saving water and energy, and will simultaneously terminating the clearing of forests resources. As vegetarian diet is cheaper than meat dishes, the left-over money can be devoted to famine relief, population control, or other socio-political causes. Ruthless exploitation of animals should be stopped to improve the condition and change the mind that "human comes first," that is claiming superiority of human thereby avoiding the importance of other species. Peter Singer says:



Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Sexists violate the principle of equality by favouring the interests of their own sex. Similarly, speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case. (9)

Therefore, humans are mostly speciesists and consider themselves as the most important and above all.

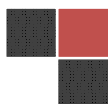
Deep ecologists, as a whole, tried to evaluate everything from a bio-centric lens, not focusing exclusively on its effects on life as a whole, including the life conditions and situations of every species and systems. But different Marxist and Socialist ecologists are critical of their views. Our world is divided into different halves on the basis of different parameters and we cannot blame human in general for exploiting the environment. Critics like Ramachandra Guha in his essay “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique” is critical and skeptical of American deep ecologists. For him, two foremost and potential challenges against nature have nothing to do with the scenario of third world realities. The consumption and annihilation of natural treasures by the First World countries and the elites of the Third World countries including industrialization and growing militarization damage the world of natural harmony. He has emphatically claimed that:

The two fundamental ecological problems facing the globe are (i) overconsumption by the industrialized world and by urban elites in the Third World and (ii) growing militarization, both in a short-term sense (i.e., ongoing regional wars) and in a long-term sense (i.e., the arms race and the prospect of nuclear annihilation). Neither of these problems has any tangible connection to the anthropocentric-biocentric distinction. (Guha 74)

Deep ecologists only consider and prioritize the need of non-human components. But critics like Bryan Norton opines that only human can change the face of nature and avoiding human in the arena of bio-centrism cannot help in changing or transforming the conditions of nature. This is the voice of sanity where we cannot deny the fact that human is at the centre and they can only improve the conditions of environment. And if human are not at the centre, then they should get equal importance as others residing on earth. Human should be included in eco-critical issue as part of wider nature.

Peter Reading’s *Faunal* begins with the poem “On Bruny Island, off Tas.,” tells about a journey of a group of biologists to Tasmania and it presents a stark contrast between human and animal world.

we were driving along a dirt road  
to locate a breeding pair  
of Fort-spotted Pardalote  
when we damn near hit an Echidna  
(*Tachyglossus setosus*)  
snuffling into the verge grass.  
We got out to scrutinise it.  
Inhale its stink and consider  
this marvelous monotreme  
and all elegant biodiversity. (1-10; Reading 11)



First two lines of two stanzas with lower case “we” and upper case. “We” symbolizes the contrast between human and non-human world. The work of the biologists is taken ironically where “we” in lower case attempt to incorporate human, these biologists, as part of the biodiversity in which they are trying to discover a rare species. This indirectly illustrates the superiority of human over non-human thereby showing the patronizing attitude of human. The driving car emblemizes the penetration of human into the hidden unknown world of nature. The “We” in upper case makes them aware of the supremacy of human. Though the poem is an eco-poem, that is, it represents nature scientifically and not poetically or with false beautification, the attitude of “scrutinizing” unearths the condescending attitude of human.

The poem is eco-centric and is about flora and fauna. But there is a vast gap between men and animals because men are supposed to speak for themselves, which prove the ascendancy of human over nature. The car stands between the two worlds. The question is how much the poet’s attempt to substitute anthropocentrism by eco-centric viewpoint is realistic and successful. It is very difficult to represent and save nature without the help of human and vice versa. Ironically, this poem questions the deep ecological view of dismissing human for the sake of nature. Human are at the centre and only human efforts can place everything properly.

The second poem which I would like to analyze is “Fieldnote” which is more of a scratched out page with two loaded lines than a formal poem. The poem begins with the line, “I riffle my notebooks’ leaves now at my desk” then the copy of scratched field note and finally the line, “A page erased, eroded, foxed, forgotten.” (Reading 14). The struck out page symbolizes the meaninglessness of the research which human are continuously doing to read nature and its behavior. The fate of the notes taken is to lie on desk without any practical significance *whats oever*. A field work followed by some notes and written pages and consequently forgotten after the work is done are pointless. In reality, no one takes any proper viable and convenient step to improve and work on the observations made. Use of abstract things without proper implementation means nothing. Human is too active to work and to forget in the name of serving his/her own purpose. Their futile research is hardly contributing anything to the improvement of the apocalyptic contemplation about future. We attempt to save nature but at the end it turns out to be only useless.

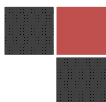
The poem “Endangered” is set in Florida, USA. The choice of this setting is an important strategy on the part of the poet to highlight the immense damage which is solely done by the first world countries as already pointed out by Ramachandra Guha.

Down on the Gulf Coast of Texas, in the Aranas Wetland,  
Johnston and I were observing a posse of Whooping Cranes

.....  
and we knew, we knew we would die without seeing the species again.

(1-8; Reading 56)

The changing condition of nature is a global phenomenon and in this not only wetlands are at the verge of extinct but even human are equally endangered. Entire world is under threat of rapid transformation which is mostly destructive. Human is as much in danger as the whooping crane of wetlands. The sound of the birds seems to be like a clarion of the upcoming destruction of human as part of the biodiversity. A healthy biodiversity relies on the maintenance of a proper food chain where each and every





component is dependent on one another. The reality of survival depends on a proper cause and effect relation where every decision should be taken on the basis of some causes. Survival, primordially, depends upon realistic and reasonable needs.

The poem “BirdLady” ironically critiques the act of patronizing non-human components like birds. The act of the “birdlady” to look after a few birds in Vondel Park by giving some food and water cannot help them to survive in the long run. These birds are eaten up by us as flesh. Deep ecologists reject the idea of patronizing animals because for the survival of animals it is very much required to give them their coveted habitat in which they can grow and prosper properly and healthily. They need their own home and nature. A critic like Peter Singer opines to leave eating flesh so that they can survive. Human has a prejudiced speciesist thought of patronizing and feeding a few for the betterment of human not of these animals and birds. Human can easily survive without consuming flesh.

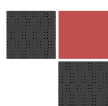
In all the above analyzed poems, human is seen as superior to non human natural world where humans are always trying to control and dominate. The poem “Reiterative” seems to represent the superior power of nature over human, but ultimately human comes out victorious over nature.

Now, beyond hope, I still owe the gods great gratitude.  
 Marvels are many, mankind among them who navigates oceans,  
 driven by stormy south-westerners ...  
 . . . his laborious proffess  
 And Earth, wearied, wears on, each year turning under the plough. (1-5;  
 Reading 38)

Sometimes human seems to be puppet in the hands of nature when they face any natural calamity but with the due course of time they do come out from it. Earth is ‘wearied’ of all the tortures man has imposed on it for ages thereby intending to be master of nature. All the above poems including this are eco-centric in nature. Though in this poem nature seems to be invincible but man ultimately tames that as well.

But the questions are—are humans safe from the threats of these damages? Humans are very much part of environmental biodiversity and they are neither more important nor less. They are equally in jeopardy as the nature and animals or non-human components of the Earth are. Human should be included in the eco-centric issue as being part of wider nature. The poem “Anthropological” questions the dynamic arguments of deep ecologists that are, substituting anthropocentrism for ecocentrism. Though humans are prejudiced and speciesist in their attitude, we should not forget that humans cannot think of themselves by getting dissociated from the external world. The genealogy of human growth has pertinently proved that human is part of a bigger food chain and biodiversity. Before blaming human for all ruins, we should discriminate before denouncing them. Ramachandra Guha has rightly and emphatically argued that most of the ruins of nature are perpetrated by the first world consumptions. The have-nots or the third world population are mainly facing the odds with a minimal fault. People like aboriginals live on with their bare necessities without asking for luxury. These barbaric primitive people are as endangered as animals. They are also at the verge of extinction because their home and habitat are destroying.

There is vast heterogeneity among humans as well and there are many human who needs protection. They know how to live in compatibility with nature. They are



judiciously living and using nature without any touch of civility, completely away from modernization.

These tribes possess no fragment of attire  
and go quite naked. Rain was falling hard,  
and this, together with the spray combined,  
ran down their naked bodies in rivulets.

.....  
These hapless wretches, stunted in their growth,  
had hideous faces daubed with gaudy paint,  
their skins engrimed with filth, their hair entangled,  
their voices harsh, discordant, ululant,  
their gestures violent, lacking dignity.  
Watching such men, one scarcely can believe  
that they are fellow-creatures inhabiting  
the same world. (13-20; Reading 17)

These images are evidences that aboriginals are similar to animals dissociated from the civilized world. Blindly and indiscriminately critiquing human as a whole should be controlled. We cannot nullify the layers of diversity in human world. Humans are inseparably linked to nature and there is vast difference between using and exploiting nature. It is indispensable to be anthropological to be ecocentric.

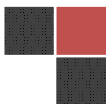
No government or head men are there here,  
but hostile neighbours, speaking in different thoughts.  
(39-40; Reading 18)

Reality is tempestuous and not beautiful and disciplined.

Another important question about layers of human is that are all civilized men equally getting the opportunity to exploit or consume nature? Are they privileged enough to save or destroy nature? The poem "Neighbourhood Watch" is about the subjugated lot of London who represent the underbelly of London. The unrecognized and unidentified master-less people live their life without any government control or impositions. They are mostly excluded from the discourse of development of the city. Not only aboriginals, but these underprivileged hapless lot are also very much part of the heterogeneous world of human. Then the question is development only directed towards the elites and middle class of society who contribute to be the face of the country.

The PM wants to see the squeegee merchants  
(who lurk at traffic lights to accoust your windscreens)  
eliminated. Beggars he finds repulsive,  
offensive to the sensibility –  
these 'homeless' people simply are a nuisance  
and should be done away with so that decent  
members of the community don't see them  
and feel distressed. (9-16; Reading 12)

The governmental heads want to eliminate them from the face of country so that these unprivileged parts cannot malign and show the actual reality. Either killing them or keeping them or incarcerating them or giving economic help is not pragmatic step. One





should know and dig out the actual problem behind everything. These races of people are suffering and they need to be saved as well. We need a proper balanced voice of sanity.

Thus, as William Rueckert renders that “the present codes of civilization is suicidal... the conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities— the human, the natural can co-exist, cooperate and flourish in the biosphere.” We cannot avoid the needs of human beings for serving the critical ideas of bio-centrism because human race is as endangered and hapless as the biodiversity is. There has to be a voice of sanity supporting unity and togetherness where affection and trust in the bond are expected to survive. There has to be a balance and equality between the needs of human civilization and of the ecological world.

### Works Cited:

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. USA: Manchester University Press, 2002. Print.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. New York: Mariner Books, 2002. Print.
- Coupe, Laurence, ed. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl, and Harold Fromm, Editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Athens: Georgia UP, 1996. Print.
- Guha, Ramachandra. “The Paradox of Global Environmentalism.” *Current History*, 99, 640, Nov., 2000. pp 367-70. Print.
- . “Deep Ecology Revisited.” *The Great New Wilderness Debate: An Expansive Collection of Writings Defining Wilderness from John Muir to Gary Snyder*. Edited by J. Baird Callicott and Micheal P. Nelson, Athens: University of Georgia UP, 1998. pp 271-279. Print.
- . “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness preservation: A Third World Critique.” *Environmental Ethics*, 11, 1989. pp 71-83. Print.
- Naess, Arne. “The Third World, Wilderness, and Deep Ecology.” *The Great New Wilderness Debate: An Expansive Collection of Writings Defining Wilderness from John Muir to Gary Snyder*. Ed. J. Baird Callicott and Micheal P. Nelson. Athens: University of Georgia, 1995. pp 280-292. Print.
- Sessions, George, ed. *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century*. University of Michigan: Shambala, 1994. Print.
- Reading, Peter. *Faunal*. United Kingdom: Bloodaxe Books, 2002. Print.

