



Eco-Philosophical Perspectives in the Select Poems of Gary Snyder: A critical Exposition

Rakesh S Wagmore, Dr. Madhushri G. Kallimani

Department of English, Rani Channamma University, Belagavi, Karnataka, India

Received: 07 Nov 2023; Received in revised form: 11 Dec 2023; Accepted: 17 Dec 2023; Available online: 23 Dec 2023
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Abstract— *Eco Philosophy as a captivating branch of academic study emerged on the international theoretical scene as a viable and acknowledged field of academic inquiry, Eco-Philosophy has undergone a virtually incessant process of improvement, expansion, broadening of scope, and reworking of fundamental concepts. It began with serious nature of addressing, analysing, and understanding the essence of ecological vision and literary application. It is being followed by divergences over the correct area of study, the best theories, and the compatibility of local or national literary and critical traditions. Even the use of dialects in oral performance falls under this spectrum of study. In order to examine the various facets of Eco Philosophy as an Eco critical enquiry in the field of poetry, the poetic vision of Gary Snyder is profoundly accredited. With an intense interpretation of Snyder's poetry, the present article deals with Snyder's idealistic vision of the relationship between human beings and the natural world. It investigates the ecological implications in his major poetic works, Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems (1959), Turtle Island (1974) and Mountains and Rivers without End (1996). An earnest attempt made to read those works from an ecological point of view to draw the attention of the readers to the significance of the environmental concerns embodied in the poetic works of Gary Snyder.*



Keywords— *Ecology, Interdependence, Nonhuman, Ecopoetry and Eco Philosophy.*

INTRODUCTION

People's mindfulness of the ecological aspect of the macrocosm may go back further than five centuries, specifically to the rise of western civilization in the seventeenth century. Technological inventions and scientific discoveries were all directed towards achieving mortal control over the natural terrain. In that streamline of philosophical interpretation, ecological value and its application of thought process led to the rise of the concept 'Eco Philosophy'.

Eco philosophy is a philosophical or ethical approach to the environment which emphasizes the importance of action and individual beliefs. Often referred to as "ecological wisdom," it is associated with other environmental ethics, including deep ecology and bioregionalism.

Eco philosophy originated with the norwegian philosopher arne naess. Naess described "it is a structured form of inquiry" he called eco philosophy, which examines nature and our relationship to it. He defined "it is a discipline, like philosophy itself, which is based on analytical thinking, reasoned argument, and carefully examined assumptions." He further states that "eco philosophy as a set of beliefs about nature and other people which varies from one individual to another. Everyone, in other words, has their own ecosophy, and though our personal philosophies may share important elements, they are based on norms and assumptions that are particular to each of us." (Naess, 2-3)

Eco Philosophical conception of Gary Snyder.

Having lived his childhood in the Pacific Northwest, Gary Snyder began to develop deep passions for the natural world at an early age, which was later characterised his lyrical style of poetic construction. Snyder

developed his ecological vision of poetry as a way of stimulating positive changes in the ecological world order, which may help to save life on this earth. Also, Snyder's great interest in Buddhism significantly contributed to his involvement with environmental issues, as he set up considerable correspondence between Buddhism and environmentalism. Buddhism desires to achieve loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and serenity not only for mortal beings but for all effects in the macrocosm. Being unkind to the earth and its inhabitants opposes Buddhist beliefs. Therefore, Snyder blends religion and environmentalism in his creative mode of writing.

Snyder believes that nature is composed of bitsy organisms, creatures, shops, and mortal societies. He calls for the protection of nature from the damage of civilization and urges humans to be in touch with their 'wild characters' and return to a sense of union with nature. Although Snyder belongs to the academy of deep ecology, his interests also associated him with social ecology. Social ecology is substantially concerned with the debate between forms of power in the mortal world and how this leads to the control of nature. It stresses that the result of mortal destruction by inhuman nature is a social bone.

While deep ecology is more concerned with changing mortal knowledge as it draws from religious and philosophical stations. Snyder concurs with both, emphasising the need to change knowledge while championing social changes to harmonise humans' relationship to inhuman nature.

Gary Snyder's poetical wisdom and conceptual nature of Eco Philosophy.

Snyder's ecological views are inferred from certain traditional beliefs taken from Indian culture, Buddhism, and other contemporary beliefs. Snyder looks at the earth as a 'Mother' to living beings.

This image is constantly perceived in his 1974 book, *Turtle Island*. According to Snyder, the relationship between the earth and living beings should be maternal since the earth is like a Mother that provides its occupants with food, water, and air. Thus, Earth deserves the respect of its children and their protection. More significantly, Snyder believes in the interdependence of all life forms on earth; this conception seems to be largely construed from Buddhism.

Snyder shares the Buddhist belief in the interrelation of all living beings, not only on a spiritual level as Buddhism sees it but also on a natural and physical level as shown in the food chain. Humankind, for Snyder, is an ostentatious form with particular characteristics like spirit and energy among colourful forms of living beings but is not superior to others as humans are only a part of them.

Ecopoetic outlook of Snyder's poetry.

Snyder is constantly referred to as an ecopoet. He wasn't as interested in producing a pleasurable depiction of nature as he was in conceiving his relationship with ecology. As J. Scott Bryson points out,

There are two main features of ecopoetics The first is an 'ecocentric perspective,' where the focus of attention isn't only humanity but also the natural world. The alternate point is that a lyric should establish a new knowledge of defending the natural terrain. It isn't humanity but nature which is superior that should be defended and admired. (Bryson, 38).

Snyder's ecological vision efficiently enterprises the significant value and constructive nature of Eco-poetry. His poetry and prose largely come from his upbringing in the Pacific Northwest, his great interest in Zen Buddhism, and his anthropological interest in the American Indians.

Eco Philosophical elements in *Riprap* poetry collection.

The opening lyric of *Riprap* (1959), Snyder's first book of poetry, 'Mid-August at Sourdough Lookout' presents an ecological image that itself grounded in Zen Buddhism as well as scientific knowledge. The lyric conveys both the land and the tone. The cohesiveness of the imagery of the first stanza suggests the smallness of the minstrel's humanity as opposed to the high, still air.

The essence of Ecological value substantially expressed in this following poetic lines:

"Down valley a smoke haze Three days heat, after five days rain Pitch glows on the fir-cones Across rocks and the meadows Swarms of new flies." (Snyder, 3).

This poem significantly substantiates essential value of ecological nature, which can be effortlessly surpassed human power and authority.

In other words, this poem ecologically emphasises the tiny place humans have in the vastness of the cosmos. To put his ideas into practice, Snyder lived with primitive people for some time on a small Japanese islet called Suwanosejima during his stay in Japan (1956-68). Snyder presents in this lyrical poem a picture of solitude and serenity. Living a simple life and being close to nature make the minstrel feel at peace. Snyder rejected the broad materialism of Western civilization, which represented its unconscious desire to render the wild world domestic and to bend nature to its will.

The poem 'Water' from *Riprap* depicts the time Snyder spent in Yosemite as a trail crew. The subsequent lines from this poem substantially portrays the equivalent value of ecosystems.

“Down valley a smoke haze Three days heat.” (Snyder, 3).

If the poem is read carefully, we can discover that Snyder places equal value between himself and other ecosystems. He does not present himself as a dominant figure but as a small part in the universe. This is shown in the last line in the poem when he is face to face with a fish. The whole poem seems to be a description of a real event but religious and ecological implications are conveyed through it. The theme Snyder emphasizes is that everything has its position in the universe and no one component is superior over others in the world.

In another poem from Riprap, ‘Milton by Firelight’ Snyder warns against the decline of the natural environment. It is a strong caution that echoed by Snyder’s thought provoking poetic illustration.

The poem considerably Read like this:

“In ten thousand years the Sierras Will be dry and dead, home of the scorpion Ice-scratched slabs and bent trees.

No paradise, no fall

Only the weathering land.” (Snyder, 9).

The poet is concerned about the damage caused to the environment by scientific “progress” which had given man superiority over the nonhuman elements of nature. In this poem, Snyder especially displays his cosmic consciousness which he always expresses in his writing.

Ecological facets in the poem ‘Alf’.

‘Alf’, another poem from his later volume *Axe Handles* (1983), has the same ecological implication of equality among all living beings. Snyder calls for new loyalty, a loyalty to the land and environment more than a flag or government.

The core value of ‘nature’, and its inclusion in human life is noticeably expressed in this following poetic lines:

“I pledge allegiance I pledge allegiance to the soil of Turtle Island

and to the beings who thereon dwell in diversity under the sun

With joyful interpenetration for all.” (Snyder, 50)

Snyder presented a new pledge which seems to be a revolutionary concept. He shifted the focus from national identity to nature. Loyalty is sworn to the soil, the beings and the ecosystem. the interdependence of all beings. Human beings are only implicitly mentioned and are never given superiority over other forms of life. This demonstrates once more that human beings are an essential component of the world but they are not the most important. The poem holds central parts of Snyder’s ecological consciousness.

Eco-Philosophical values in *Turtle Island* poetry collection.

Turtle Island, Snyder’s Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry collection published in 1974. It was a defining moment in his life, projecting him into the role of a major spokesman for an ecological vision of the world. *Turtle Island* is divided into four sections, the first three of which are written in verse and the last in prose. Snyder the ecologist emerges more clearly in this work. In this connection Charles Altieri observes the extreme significance of *Turtle Island* in this subsequent way. To quote his insightful views:

In *Turtle Island*, Snyder wrote verse which not only deal with ideas but with modes of action and with the unity of interrelationships in nature, and its verification is the fullness of the environment it creates. (Altieri, 135).

Snyder offers a model of poetry which looks meaningfully different from his previous poetic works. Like Snyder’s poetry of the late 1960s, many of the poems found in *Turtle Island* are political in nature. However, with American military involvement in the Vietnam War coming to a close, Snyder’s attention had turned from matters of war and peace to environmental and ecological concerns.

In this poetic style of construction Deeply illustrated and substantially exemplified poetic lines are quoted in this remarkable means.:

“ We’re just starting, in the last ten years here, to begin to make songs that will speak for plants, mountains, animals and children. When you see your first deer of the day you sing your salute to the deer, or your first red-wing blackbird I saw one this morning! Such poetries will be created by us as we reinhabit this land with people who know they belong to it; for whom primitive is not a word that means past, but primary!, and future. These poesies to come will help us learn to be people of knowledge in this universe in community with the other people. nonhuman included brothers and sisters.” (Snyder, 42)

Snyder’s words specify that a noteworthy transformation in his revelation of poetry was under way. From *Turtle Island* onwards, Snyder the ecologist would appear more. Snyder stresses on the importance of being primitive to be in harmony with nature. In accordance with his ecological concerns, Snyder calls for poetry that includes “man, animals and ecosystems; a kind of poetry which presents a community of human and nonhuman as brothers and sisters.” (Snyder, 28)

Snyder is now less concerned with spiritual states than with man’s harmony with the environment. Man should know plant life, weather, soil and all knowledge needed to preserve biological life.

Turtle Island displays Snyder's spiritual relation to land in numerous ways. Snyder attempts to establish a connection between his scientific language as an ecologist and his literary production. When ecologists talk about ecology of oak communities, Snyder writes, "we should understand they are communities and that oak and human communities share attributes". (Snyder, 108)

In other words, human beings are part of a broad community with the non-human; plants, animals and 'a variety of wild life'. Snyder thinks that all things in the universe have equal value. To Snyder, "the richness and diversity of the nonhuman world only deepens felt responsibility for the human one. Snyder's ecological vision is that nature, society and spirit are interdependent and what happens to each would inevitably affect the others. To be more specific, what happens in nature has social and spiritual effects. Thus, what happens in society has natural and spiritual consequences and what happens spiritually has social and natural results.

Snyder also believes in the unity of cultures which can be realized through the ecological perspective that focuses on the interrelation of people. Snyder thinks that the majesty of the land would take people away from their little selves to a broader world, a world of mountains and rivers. Native American traditions as well as Buddhist traditions, which Snyder greatly admired, teach people how to go beyond of their selves. Buddhism as a philosophy was greatly admired by Snyder as it opposed materialism and does not recognize a conflict between itself and modern science. On the contrary, it holds that Buddha applied the experimental approach to the question of ultimate truth.

"Both Native Americans and Buddhists have an ecological understanding of interdependence and the equality of all living and nonliving citizens of nature". (McClintock, 121).

The opening poem of *Turtle Island*, 'Anasazi' is very important as it sets the tone for the whole work. The poem shows Snyder's interest in Native Indians for the whole poem is dedicated to the Anasazi's tribal existence and praises the state of harmony between those primitive people and their physical environment. To quote Snyder's poetic lines:

"Anasazi, Anasazi,
tucked up in clefts in the cliffs
growing strict fields of com and beans
sinking deeper and deeper in earth." (Snyder,3)

Snyder was interested in Indians since childhood. Not only did he know them through books, he lived amongst them when he was a child. The poem displays the Anasazi people as skilful at gardening, pottery making, basket weaving and architecture.

Snyder wanted to study human life, not in isolation from other elements of nature but as an integral part of the natural world. Snyder's belief for the need to recognize the earth itself as a living being, along with all its trees, rocks, plants, and animals including humans is a major theme in this poem as it is in much of Snyder's work. Throughout the poem, there is an interaction of humans, animals, plants, even sandstone and rock canyons. The poem concludes with a striking image of identification between the Indian tribe and the landscape. In this regard Molesworth states that "The poem applies to us only insofar as we can see ourselves as products of, and preservers of, a physical environment". (Molesworth, 94)

To observe and convey similar view, J. Scott Bryson writes,

I know of no one since Thoreau who has so thoroughly espoused the wild as Gary Snyder and no one who is so much its poet. The poet looks out and down from the edge of the falls where he sees half-forested, dry hills and a clear sky and observe the effect of the wind in the pines, rustling trembling limbs and twigs. (Bryson, 41)

The poem which lends the first section of *Turtle Island* its title,

'Manzanita', seems to be a song of plant life. The poem shows Snyder's concept of "ethnobotany" and the use of vegetative life in human culture. The poem celebrates the immediate physical environment.

This striking view point of Snyder is expressed in this following poetic lines:

"Manzanita the tips in fruit,

Clusters of hard green berries
The longer you look
The bigger they seem,

"little apple." (Snyder, 38)

The poem suggests that natural variety is the critical factor in creating a healthy life. That is, unity and harmony can only be achieved through the preservation of the diversity of

Each poem, in fact, "speaks to a consciousness built of a total harmonization of man with nature and man with man

'Tomorrows Song' from section three may be the most radical poem not only in this section but in the whole work. The poem expresses Snyder's most fundamental and challenging notion where animals and plants should be signified in government. If America wants to maintain its status and power, it should give the right to vote even to mountains and rivers. This, in fact, shows a remarkable development in Snyder's vision for the nonhuman world.

The radical Ecological wisdom is realistically expressed in below quoted poetic lines:

“The USA slowly lost its mandate in the middle and later twentieth century it never gave the mountains and rivers, trees and animals, a vote.

all the people turned away from it

myths die; even continents are impermanent.” (Snyder 76)

The poem depicts Snyder's most central notion where animals and plants should be signified in government. If America wants to maintain its status and power, it should give the right to vote even to mountains and rivers.

Ecopoetic characteristics in *Mountains and Rivers without End* poetry collection.

‘Walking the New York Bedrock’ from *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996), which is considered by many as Snyder's most significant work, explores the wilderness within the city landscape. The poem speaks about plant and animal life within the city. Snyder does not show resentment towards the urban environment. As Christopher Benefy point out "Snyder imagines the world of wild nature beneath the structure of civilization". (Benefy, 42)

In order to resemble the sensitive notion of ecological debate Snyder expresses in one of his poem *Mountains and Rivers without End*. To quote this,

“Squalls

From the steps leading down to the subway.

Blue-chested runner, a female, on car streets,

Red lights block traffic but she like the Beam of a streetlight in the whine of Skilsaw,

She runs right through.

A cross street leads toward a river North goes to the woods South takes you fishing

Peregrines nest at the thirty-fifth floor”. (Snyder, 100- 101)

While contemplating the city in a dreamlike vision, the speaker comes to recognize that he could escape this city by going to the nearby woods and rivers but he does not need to. One can have illumination in the city as well as in the country. City and country are accordingly not at odds. Whenever one is, one must inhabit the place, know it deeply and flow with it. Like the ginkgo trees in the subway, the wild peregrine hawk is at "home" on a ledge ‘at the thirty-seventh floor’. Snyder's view on civilization is different from that of the Beat writers. While the Beat writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg reject the urban way of life and oppose all kinds of civilization, Snyder does not. Through celebrating nature and wild life, Snyder believes that one may explore the wild within the city and gain enlightenment without going to the mountains. It does not make any difference for Snyder, therefore, to live in the

country or in the city since he can be enlightened in both. Snyder can discover the wild even within the city and the wilderness has acquired added meaning from that which was known to Thoreau and Whitman. Snyder elevates the wild and was its poet in the second half of the 20th century, yet he adds a new urban dimension to it. Snyder once told New York

"It is simply placing myself at a different place in the network, which does not mean that I'm any less interested in the totality of the network, it's simply that's where I center myself". (Snyder 37)

Snyder made great efforts to redefine the traditional concept of nature and fought against the negative notions and acts of people that greatly harmed environment. Snyder's writings, therefore, tried to change the attitude of people towards nature and by doing so, he wanted to change the way they act towards nature. His writings showed new ways of interacting with nature which preserve the natural world. For Snyder, a possible solution for the global crisis is to stimulate people to reconcile and bridge the gap between their civilization and wild culture. Snyder's commitment to this presentation of nature is instrumental in shaping modern environmental thought. Although Snyder's concern and involvement in environmental activism may be seen as an active display of passion, one can argue that his writings are more active and influential than his activism.

Snyder wrote in an essay entitled "Writers and the War against Nature" in one of his collection of essays ‘Back on the Fire’,

"What is happening now to nature worldwide, to plant life and wildlife, in ocean, grassland, forest, savannah, and desert in all spaces and habitat can be likened to a war against nature." (Snyder, 68)

CONCLUSION

In a way, Snyder seems to be similar to other American nature writers like Henry David Thoreau, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey. However, Snyder's idea of nature goes beyond the conventional romanticizing of it. He attempts to be objective though no description can be completely objective. Snyder immersed himself in experience and mixed the inner and outer worlds.

In all his poetry, ecological issues are given great importance, especially in *Turtle Island*. Snyder fought for the preservation of the environment from the deadly harm modern civilization caused. By showing the sublimity of the natural world and giving a sacred dimension to the moral commitment to the environment's safety from any probable human damage, Snyder could attract the people's attention

to the beauty of the wilderness and urge them to protest against any harm which might be done to the natural world. Snyder considered himself a mediator between civilization and nature. He became, in America, a patron saint of ecology. His campaign for ecology has never ended. Snyder made great efforts to redefine the traditional concept of nature and fought against the negative notions and acts of people that greatly harmed environment. Snyder's writings, therefore, tried to change the attitude of people towards nature and by doing so, he wanted to change the way they act towards nature. His writings showed new ways of interacting with nature which preserve the natural world. For Snyder, a possible solution for the global crisis is to stimulate people to reconcile and bridge the gap between their civilization and wild culture. Snyder's commitment to this presentation of nature is instrumental in shaping modern environmental thought. Although Snyder's concern and involvement in environmental activism may be seen as an active display of passion, one can argue that his writings are more active and influential than his activism.

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