

## INVESTIGATING MARXIST ECOCRITICISM IN AESOP'S SELECTED FABLES

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### ABSTRACT

The study explores Aesop's selected fables through ecocritical lens by identifying Marxist features of the stories. The stories are famous for the moral lessons they give but other than that, they provide a critique of the writer's mind and his representation of nature. The stories build up certain power structures based on beliefs of contemporary times which are analyzed in this paper. By debunking ideologies working behind the power structures in the stories their impact and representation of nature is scrutinized leading to the understanding of power dynamics. The research also looks at the story from the perspective of Gaia Hypothesis which binds all the elements utilized in the stories, making them logical and proving the structuring of the fables up to certain extent, correct. The study concludes that the elements used to show the power dynamics, classism and different natural structures are all the working of Gaia Hypothesis.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Marxism, Gaia Hypothesis, Power Dynamics.

### INTRODUCTION

The great stories of the past were never forgotten because of oral tradition, similarly, the great truths of universe established because of certain philosophies. These philosophies were difficult for the masses to digest but the genre of fable made it easier. Aesop is one of the famous fable writers, almost all the fables that we know today that were written are associated with Aesop. He used this genre to construct certain philosophies and to impart wisdom in a non-conventional yet attainable way. He used animals as his mouthpiece and through them constructs a world of ying and yang. These animals and their experiences teach many moral lessons to children but above all they are pieces of wisdom for all.

*Aesop's Fables* thus become a masterpiece, shedding light on the philosophies of life. It contains all the critical elements that one needs to navigate the modern world. It is the collection of abstract philosophies which articulate the universal experience of man on earth. Aesop's use of nature

in his fables can be studied under various epistemes but one significant study is through ecocritical lens. Ecocriticism explores the relationship of nature with man and its behaviour, it identifies the effects both have on each other. The critical school of thought emerged from the scientific field of environmentalism which deliberates on ideas such as global warming, green studies and future based clones-cyborgs. In the world where sustainable development goals are in focus, phenomena such as climate change, impact of human existence on earth and its resources and the debate who is exhausting whom, earth or human, is very significant (Brandlin). To understand these cataclysms certain questions, are needed to be asked i.e. what is the relationship between man and earth, and how is it being handled.

To answer this question, Aesop sheds wisdom through his stories. His stories can thus be analyzed by identifying the elements of nature present in them and by investigating the representation of

nature which preludes to the relationship of man with nature. Many writers have tried to explain the relationship of man with nature like Willaim Wordsworth and the poets of romantic age, many scientists have tried to explain the relationship between nature and man. But the symbiosis and equilibrium between the two was always unexplained till the time James Lovelock proposed Gaia Hypothesis.

The study thus provides insight into the mutual relationship between man and nature and its representation as well as it deconstructs certain ecological structures which are significant for the balanced working of the system by explaining the super-structure i.e. earth.

### Significance of the Study

With the alarming rate of climate change and the ultimate ecological concerns that have been raised, this study analyzes the fables which are commonly known to everyone and critically evaluate the elements of nature which are agents of capitalism in the world of text and otherwise. It also explores the point of unison between the elements of nature and non-nature through the supposition of Gaia hypothesis.

### Research Objectives

To identify elements of nature and their representations in the text.

To deconstruct Marxist structures in the fables.

To build concord between man and nature through Gaia Hypothesis.

## 2. Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and uses ecocritical framework as a foundation. It also utilizes the elements of Marxism to deconstruct ideologies and structures of nature that are prevalent in the stories of Aesop. To bring consensus between literary representation and ecological concerns, the idea of Lovelock: Gaia hypothesis is used.

## 3. Literature Review

*Aesop's Fables* has a very controversial origin. According to research, Aesop was a slave who rose to fame and that fame, which was due to his wisdom, became the very source of his demise (Miranda). Aesop's tales became popular because they preach abstract wisdom through everyday

philosophy. It is relevant for the masses because it was meant for slaves and was written by a slave who knew the hardships and mentality of the hard-trodden. All the stories are not written by him but somehow got associated with him making it a classification; Aesopic fables.

Fable is a narrative based genre focusing on emphasizing "human folly". It serves the purpose of giving "moral—or lesson for behaviour" in the stories helping the audience to understand everyday survival philosophies (Britanica). Aesopic fables use the images of animals to deliver the analogy of nature and man making the message easy to understand. Fables were used not only because they were an easy philosophical method of argument but "because of the limitations of [fable]—that is, that it must be a short, simple narrative making a clear and memorable point that can reach a wide audience—its interest tends to be overwhelmingly practical" (Hunt 379).

According to *Rhetoric*, fables are "comparatively easy to invent, whereas it is hard to find parallels among actual past events... all you require is the power of thinking out your analogy" (Aristotle Book II). These analogies then serve various purposes not just shared themes of love and hatred, friendship and enmity, honesty and deceit etc. but they provide a cultural critique on the discourse of the writer and the audience, it shows the power dynamics and the structures embedded in hegemonic identities.

Aesopic fables can be categorized into four categories of characters ranging from all animal characters to all human characters, one human and one animal character, one human/animal and one inanimate character and lastly, a mixture of all. The mixing of these characters shows one significant concept that is an ecocritical element in the tales. All the tales are knitted in a way that the natural element becomes a requirement to convey the message. The animals used are either metaphors of human qualities or personify certain human ideals that are absent otherwise.

Ecocriticism is the "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Fromm and Glotfelty xviii). It is the study of representation of nature in literary works as well as the study of human behaviour towards nature. Advanced ideas of ecocritical thought ponder on "the boundaries between the human and the non-human, nature and non-nature" investigating and

deconstructing these structures and their impact (Owl and Gutierrez). These boundaries are constructed on the ideologies and belief system of the capitalist world making power struggle an implicit affair. In Aesopic fables we see these tightly knit plot structures which are simple yet giving commentary on the times they were written in and on the general perception of the world. The dichotomy of good animal versus bad animal, the powerful and powerless, the innocent human versus wild beast etc. are examples of the representation of nature's structuring according to man.

The ideological structures of nature in the fables also pose a deeper question of truism which is one of the traits of these tales (Hanning). These structures defile the natural element and propose that one part is superior to than other but to conclude the argument Lovelock gives Gaia Hypothesis which argues that "that living organisms on the planet interact with their surrounding inorganic environment to form a synergetic and self-regulating system that created, and now maintains, the climate and biochemical conditions that make life on Earth possible" bring harmony to the unrest built by the eco-Marxist discourse (Reichle).

#### 4. Discussion and Analysis

Aesop's has constructed his fables by utilizing animal personification to give moral lessons to his readers. The stories provide abstract ideas through logically proven examples of real-life scenarios. They are a critique of life and can be called a manifesto for certain to gain wisdom. Aesop uses several elements of nature in his stories. He uses different animals as is characters like lion, fox, mouse, swans, tuna fish, cow, wolf, snake, frog, camel, peacock etc. This usage of animals as symbols is significant because through them he shows the world through another lens which is "strange to him, both akin to him and unalterably not-man, they [animals] are able to alternate, as objects of human thought" ( Willis 128). His characters are not limited to animals only, they can be classified as: all animal-based stories, all human/God based stories, all element-based stories, and a mixture of all i.e. animal, human/God and element. He does not discriminate among animals and uses all the types, that is, wild animals,

pet animals/ farm animals, birds, insect and sea animals.

He portrays an array of natural elements in his stories. These elements work together with the animal characters to complete the story's plot and make it a reality. These elements then become inanimate and project their powerlessness in front of the animals. Several elements of nature that he uses are pastures, mountains, trees, barns, honey, sky, stars, thunderbolt, vines, caves, grain, and winds etc. Although he uses unnatural elements as well like axe, chisel, book, etc. but his usage of natural elements is dominant.

Among all the natural elements he uses to build his stories, one basic natural element is the most visible i.e. water. Among 300 of his fables almost 45 have the element of water in them and the usage of this element is providing either the setting of the story or is the main motif of the story. For example, the most famous story '*The Crow and The Water Jar*', where the crow looks for water as he is thirsty and has to work hard to get it (Perry 390). The element of water in the story becomes the main motif around which the story revolves. Similarly, in the story '*The Stag and His Reflection*', the plot moves forward due to the reflection that the stag sees in the water which becomes a mirror to it (74). According to Garrard, "Nature is only valued in terms of its usefulness to us" (21). This usefulness can be analysed by the representation of nature in a work like the images of thunderstorms in movies to show destruction, and the images of doves as a symbol of peace and harmony. This usefulness then becomes problematic as we create certain stereotypes in nature as well. Aesop's usage of the element of water is thus also a typical classification of such stereotypes. In '*The Two Pots*', the image of water is shown through a river and a stream, here the water is represented as a violent being- an agent of conflict (513). Whereas, in '*The Fox and The Goat in The Well*', the element of water is shown through the water in the well which becomes a savior for the fox (113).

Aesop also uses the element of water predominantly to connect nature with the characters of animals. These animals here are not representative of nature but an agent of human nature. They elaborate on the relationship between humans and nature as can be shown through another direct medium, that is animals. According to Schonbeck, "the fable is a means to narrate a

temporal transition in the relation of humans, non-human animals and their environment” (114). This relationship can be seen in ‘*The Snake and The Farmer*’, where water in the fable is just an element bringing peace between the two making the human and the animal reduced to same status, building an ultimate comparison and a relationship (Perry 51). In the Aesopic tales, another distinct feature that can be identified is the thematic arrangement of thought in the morals established by the writer. These tales revolve around basic themes of love, friendship, hardship, and prosperity. But the most dominant theme that can be traced is the theme of strong and weak. Clayton argues, that “the thought of future divine punishment will not necessarily deter the strong or protect the weak (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). He believes that this strength and weakness is not based on the divine but is there as an eminent class structure which is working on a belief system. The classification of the classes is however done on the basis of commodifying the elements of nature, giving power to one and making the other subordinate. In stories like ‘*The Dog and The Gardner*’ (120) and ‘*The Boy and The Thief*’ (581), water becomes the agent of power distribution, making one side stronger and the other side weaker. It becomes a commodity which turns the natural element into a capital.

The element of water in the tales alludes to certain class-based structures where either human is in power, or the animal is in power (Goodenough). Based on the commodification of water and its depiction in tales, nature is being exploited in such a way that it either becomes an agent of capitalism or becomes the capital itself. The story ‘*The Farmer, The Wasp and The Partridge*’ is an example of one such phenomenon where the water becomes the trading material, giving power to the farmer (215). According to ‘*Eco-Marxism: The Road to Sustainability?*’, “Eco-Marxism is against treating nature as simply a resource haven, alienating ourselves from it and monopolising it for our private benefit” (Tsigka). But the element of water in the Aesopic tales is exactly being an agent of private benefit for the upper class i.e. the stronger. Be it the merchant in ‘*The Merchant, The Donkey and The Salt*’ (180), or the dog in ‘*The Dog, Meat and The Reflection*’ (133), both use the element of water for personal gains, using it as a

capital and destroying the sanctity of ecology and environmental consciousness.

The element of water is also represented as a force of destruction in the stories making it an inanimate object of destruction and catastrophe leading the story to its conclusion, the moral. In stories like ‘*The Shepherd and The Sea*’ (207), ‘*The farmer and The Sea*’ (168), ‘*The Rivers and The Sea*’ (412), The element of water is shown as a force of havoc, taking it out of the category of nature and categorizing it as an inanimate being. This objectified representation of the element of water through flood, violent waves and salty sea water is also important for nature and ultimately makes it a part of nature. According to James Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis, “Earth itself has to be seen as a kind of super-organism” (200). This super-organism is a being that accepts all the animate and inanimate beings as a necessary part of its self-making both interdependent. Garrard asserts “unpredictability and dynamism rather than predetermined harmony... to maintain equilibrium or balance” (204). Thus, the element of water then becomes a process instead of an element making the representation of water as natural element and as well as inanimate being justified.

## 5. Conclusion

Aesop’s fables are well decorated with the elements of nature. These elements in equilibrium with the non-natural element present certain philosophies to the readers who seek wisdom. These fables then become a source of reinforcement of ideologies but maintain certain age-old stereotypes associated with nature depicting the truth of humanity. The stereotypes construct a scheme of ideas which further divides the elements into ecocritical representatives of nature and capitalistic elements of nature. Keeping in mind all of the classifications, deconstruction of power dynamics based on classes and on commodification becomes apparent which turns our mind to an ecocritical concern of capitalistic relationship of human with nature. To conclude, the years old fables serve as a treatise of Marxist ecocriticism providing the background and foreground to personification of certain natural elements such as animals and the objectification of water as a capital and as an inanimate being. Consequently, Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis is the ultimate source of connectivity which makes the



earth and all its elements a part of a comprehensive and complex ecological whole. It not only binds them together to regulate the system properly but also helps in realizing the threats and hazards that may escalate if due attention is not given.

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