Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of *Death of a River Guide* and *Gould’s Book of Fish*

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**Abstract**

“Boy’s brother George would lay a piece of wet bark down the side of the logs burning in the fire to allow the ants to escape, and only shot just what was needed for his pot (*Death of a River Guide* 69).”

Animals have always remained in the periphery of the human world and literature. Eco critics have also focused on animals only to some extent. That is mainly because animals are used as human food. The paper is a postcolonial Eco critical reading of *Death of a River Guide* and *Gould’s Book of Fish*. Flanagan has given due importance to animals in all his novels. Animals are also part of culture of a nation. Australia has vast variety of Flora and Fauna. Flanagan writes about animals peculiar to Australian mainland. The Australian aborigines have lived in close approximation with animals. When the land was colonized, even animals of the land were affected. The paper aims to fill the gap left by Eco critics by analyzing the relationship between animals, nature and characters of the select novels.
It did not anger Harry that the carrion-eating devils had eaten half his father’s face and parts of his hands and arms. That was how it was. It was the same law that allowed them to snare wallabies with the slag of blood in their mouths. But like he felt for the wallabies, he felt for his father. He felt shock. The way that in death the pink bone of his father’s skull looked so similar to the pink bone of the wallaby carcasses.

*(Death of a River Guide 73)*

This is how Harry, a minor character in the *Death of a River Guide* reacts to finding his father’s death, he is surprised to find similarity in death of man and animals. The paper aims to analyze Flanagan’s select novels using the concepts of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. Richard Miller Flanagan is an Australian novelist from Tasmania. He was born in Langford, Tasmania in 1961, as the fifth of six children. He descended from Irish convicts transported during great famine to Van Diemen’s Land. He grew up in a remote mining town of Roseberry on Tasmania’s western coast. His creative oeuvre includes nonfiction, fiction and film scripts in and around Tasmania. His major novels include *Death of a River Guide* (1994), *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), *Gould’s Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (2001), *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006), *Wanting* (2008), *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013) and *The First Person* (2017). His major nonfiction includes *A Terrible Beauty: History of the Garden River Country* (1985), *The Rest of the World is Watching-Tasmania to the Greens* (1990), *Codename Iago: The story of John Friedrich* (1991), *Paris – Fed Bastards: A History of the Politics of the Unemployed in Britain 1884-1939* (1991) and *And What Do You Do, Mr. Gable?* (2016). A number of contributors note the imagery of the line and the circle in Richard Flanagan’s writing as different and definite forms of construing history, familiar native community and literary forms.
Ecocritical post-colonial study is a newly emerged field in literary criticism. The theory combines the study of post-colonial environment in literary work and reveals a relationship between literature and the environment. Before the word ‘Ecocriticism’ was coined in the world of literature, from the beginning, writers were exclusively engaged presenting nature as source of inspiration and a privilege to evolve their ideas and pen them down. With the introduction of the term Ecocriticism in literary criticism by the Association of the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1993, scholars approached the analysis of texts to highlight environmental concerns and explore the roles of literature to bring awareness to society. Post-colonialism, on the other hand, as a response to colonization, studies the cultural and economic exploitation of the colonized/marginalized-- the natives and their land. As one can see the split between the two schools of thought-- nature versus culture-- has been a trend for more than a decade. This split of thought has obliterated the fact that the environment is an integration of nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, animate and inanimate. Post-colonial ecocritical studies takes the challenge to respond to these two separate fields; post-colonial and ecocriticism, by studying the environment as a complete body composed of humans, animals, and land. It redirects critical thinking towards the relationship between humans (indigenous and foreign) and land and humans and nonhumans.

Contemporary studies offer a rethinking of post-colonialism. It is not true that post-colonialism is unaware of environmental changes and recurring problems because of people’s neglectful and oblivious attitude towards the environment. Theoretically, environmental studies have never been the emphasis of post-colonialism. Commonwealth literatures under post-colonial scholarships are restricted to geographical and political conditions. Post-colonialism offers an understanding of human culture shaped by imperial power. One cannot deny the fact that imperialism influences both people and places simultaneously. When any region is colonized, it means the whole environment is colonized. The environment begins to
be manipulated by the dominant power. Besides, land provides an identity to people who belong to the place. Hence, any kind of intrusion in terms of power politics harms integrity of the culture and the environment. The environment is inseminated with history; every trait (land, animals, plants, animals, etc.) which constitute the environment witnesses changes that occurred in the past and present.

Flanagan made his debut in the world of Fiction with *Death of a River Guide* (1994) which narrates the story of Alijaz Cosini who is drowning beneath a water fall on a remote Tasmanian river. Beset by vision, he relives not just his own life but that of his family and he in his imagination sees his father Harry, burying his own father Boy. He also witnesses his grandfather Boy as a young man and his aunty Ellie, being chased by a cow she believes is Werowa spirit. In the waters that run over him Alijaz fantasizes a world where his story connects to family stories that are Aboriginal, Celtic, Italian, English, Chinese and East European. What he ultimately discovers in the flood of the past is the soul history of his country. It has one festival awards or literature and national fictional award (1996). It has also won Victorian premier's literary awards 1995.

*Gould’s Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* is a fictionalized account of the convict Willaim Buelow. Gould’s life at Macquarie Harbour and elsewhere during his life in Van Diemen’s Land. It makes use of paintings by real Van Diemen’s Land convict artist Willaim Buelow Gould reproduced with permission from Willaim Gould’s Sketch book of Fishes held by the Allport library and museum of fine arts, state of Tasmania. The images of fish are used both as chapter headings and inspirations for characters. Billy Gould was a forger and thief sentenced to life imprisonment in the Van Diemen’s Land. After six months he escaped and boarded a whaler for Americas before long he was in prison again. The prison doctor Lempriere utilizes Gould’s painting talents to create illustrated taxonomy of countries sea creatures lost and recreated its surfaces Gould’s life. It won Commonwealth Writers Prize.
2002, South East Asia and South Pacific Region Best Book 2002, Overall Best Book Award 2002, Victorian Premier Literary Award 2002

The word "ecocriticism" 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 (in Coeur d'Alene), when Cheryll Glotfelty (at the time a graduate student at Cornell, now Assistant Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno) not only revived the term but urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field that heretofore had been known as "the study of nature writing." Cheryll's call for an "ecocriticism" was immediately seconded at that same WLA meeting by Glen Love (Professor of English at the University of Oregon) in his Past President's speech, entitled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism."

Since that meeting in 1989, the term "ecocriticism" has bloomed in usage, so that now one finds it appearing with some frequency in calls for papers, critical articles, and indeed academic job descriptions. Indications are that acceptance of the term is imminent.

Scholarly interest in animals, meanwhile, has remained on the fringes of ecocritical writing, the mainstream preferring instead to continue to pursue one of the inaugural goals of ecocriticism—namely, of recouping professional dignity for the “undervalued genre of nature writing” (Glotfelty xxxi). Even before ecocriticism had proclaimed itself a new critical method, interest in animals was on the fringes of environmentalist movements. Theories from the fringes of mainstream contemporary ecocriticism—such as those of Randy Malamud, Barney Nelson, and the increasingly supplanted ecofeminist corpus—have, however, produced significant scholarly dialogue about connections between environmental and animal issues.

If we assume that ecocriticism is ethically committed to promoting the health of the biosphere of which we and other animals are a part, then the many uses to which people put
nonhuman animals must surely be important, especially given the degree to which these uses impact negatively on the well-being of the biosphere. Statistics on one of these uses, meat production, for example, are easily found showing that meat pollutes more, uses more resources, and causes more suffering in the world (not only in the form of pollution but in the form of extinctions) than non-meat-based diets. Animals are an ecocritical issue.

What counts as ecocritical ethics that include animals is carefully laid out in activist terms by Randy Malamud in Poetic Animals and Animal Souls under five general categories: such ethics, Malamud argues, should encourage people, 1) to see animals without hurting them; 2) to understand animals “in their own contexts, not in our contexts”; 3) to teach “about animals’ habits, their lives, their emotions, their natures, as much as can be done from our limited and biased perspective”; 4) to advocate “respect for animals, on their own terms”; and 5) to develop “a culturally and ecologically complex, problematized vision of what an animal means” to replace definitions currently employed (44, 45). What is interesting here, though, is the absence of any mention of diet or clothes. Surely, it is in the clothes we wear and in the food we eat (as Fudge has also argued in “Saying Nothing” 70) that we have our most immediate day-to-day contact with animals?

Humans, of course, are animals, and the distinction between human and animal is a false one, but obvious behavioural and physical differences between human and nonhuman animals compel the distinction. At the same time, though, we seek similarities, and anthropomorphism functions as a kind “of a perceptual strategy that is both involuntary and necessary” (Guthrie 51).

The basic and broadly agreed upon definition of anthropomorphism is that it roughly describes the attribution of human psychological traits to nonhuman animals and things. Anthropomorphism is extremely useful, and, as Eileen Crist argues, it transforms and transfigures our understanding of the animals being described. Malamud argues that it
“promises to elevate the status of animals in general cultural regard” because it is less easy to tolerate the suffering of nonhuman animals when their emotions, intelligence, behaviour, and feelings seem to resemble our own (Reading 37–38).

Perhaps one of the reasons animals have largely been left out of the kinds of environmental discussions ecocritics have had is that they are, for many people, food and clothing objects. If this is true, if one of the reasons ecocriticism has been slow to discuss animals is that they are useful objects, then it is also equally true that animals function less as objects, function very differently in the environmental imagination than rivers and mountains and life forms less sentient than animals. Animals are less static than most non-animal life, and are therefore less fixed features of relatively static imagined environments. In this sense, animals are outside of the environment and are also often therefore outside of discourses about the environment.

The episode of Harry’s reaction to his father’s death is quite interesting. Here, Post memory can be applied to Harry, who has suffered the trauma as experienced by his father, behaves on the occasion of his death.

“Harry learnt to lay the thin twisted brass-wire snares out along the wallaby runs. He set thm so that they dangled just above the track, near invisible. When a wallaby or possum came scurrying along their customary track it would run straight into the snare. The wire loop would slip around the animal’s neck and, released from its peg in the ground, spring into the air, tightening as the despaaarate animal struggled and thrashed to be free ” (66).

The very first chapter of the book is narrated by Sid Hammet. The book has magical fairy the like elemnets. Sid Hammet, an unemployed Tasmanian comes across a junk store in Salamaca, were he gets a chance to come cross a strange book. The book was written in a
chaotic manner, sometimes the letters went upside down or wherever the writer could find a little space.

THE KELPY

The invasion of Australia- An unfortunate misunderstanding- Barres of black beads-
The King & I-the error of Jean –Babeuf Audubon-Birds as burners-Captain Pinchbeck & the French Revolution- Black war-Clucas the bandito- His perfidy-The Cockchafer- Tragic death of the machine breaker-Bonfires of words.(46)

Each hinted phrase stands for an episode in Gould’s life, because of lack of space he records them as hints. the novel is all about developing these hints, in each chapter he paints and fish and therefore each chapter is named after a fish, King was his fellow cellmate. Machine breaker is one of the cruel punishments given to convicts, they are supposed to ride thee machine. One of the convict slipped step and the machine broke his body the convict was jammed in between the wheeels and he became an object of pity for he was left to die painful death. In the character of Gould, instances of Past memory is clearly seen, he is the epitome of Australian Aboriginal suffering. His life and his character are moulded by the life of his ancestres.

The episodes of twelve fish mentioned in the novel are:

1. The pot-belied seahorse
2. The kelpy
3. The porcupine Fish
4. The stargazer
5. The leatherjacket
6. The serpent eel
7. The sawtooth shark
8. the striped cowfish
9. the crested weedfish

10. the freshwater crayfish

11. the silver dory

12. the weedy seadragon.

The fictional character Gould is a convict and painter. He is assigned by the lieutenant of the colony to paint the fish found near Tasmania. The lieutenant wanted to compile the paintings and help in the biological nomenclature of the fish.

The Earth belongs to animals as well, with the change in civilization, colonization and globalization animal life gets affected, therefore, the ecocritics should make it a point to bring the cause of animals from the periphery to the centre of critical discussions.
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