



Repercussion of the Dystopic waste Land: An Eco-Critical study of Pat Barker's Double Vision

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Abstract

Nature is traditionally a setting or a background in a novel. Nevertheless, the nature possesses the ability to influence, respond, and react to the human characters and also influence the narrative to a larger extent. The leading ecologist, Barry Commoner's first law of ecology is that "everything is connected to everything else" by which he insists on the connection of human world to everything else in the ecosphere. It is a universal fact that human behaviours are a reflection of one's psyche. Likewise, the representation of nature in the British novelist Pat Barker's novel, *Double Vision* is a reflection of the dark, human and natural world throughout the novel. This paper attempts to divulge nature as a character in Pat Barker's novel which influences, responds and affects the other characters and the narrative. Pertaining to that argument, the researcher believes that through this elevation of the nature as a character in the novel, the literary work fulfils the implications and mindfulness to nature by the humankind.

Keywords: Nature, Mindfulness, Wounded land, Traumatized land.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the term 'Ecocriticism', which focuses on the connection between literature and the environment has emerged as an interesting and important field of study. Coined in 1978 by William Rueckert, the term has taken different names over the period such as 'ecocritical study', 'environmental studies', 'eco-poetics' and so on. The leading ecocritical thinker Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism in its most simple form as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (1). In the recent times, Ecocriticism has become largely an interdisciplinary study including the fields of psychology, anthropology, media studies, theology and philosophy. Cheryl Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) affirms that "scholars throughout the humanities are finding ways to add an environmental dimension to their respective disciplines" (xxi). She also claims that literary scholars "specialize in questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, and language, and it is in these areas that they are making a substantial contribution to environmental thinking" (Glotfelty and Fromm xxii).

Traditionally, nature is considered to be a backdrop or a setting in a work of literature. On the contrary, this paper argues that nature is a character in its own right and is used to reflect the ideas of the author with regards to the novel *Double Vision* (2003) written by the British novelist Pat Barker. Barker, born in Thornaby, near Middlesbrough on 8th May, 1943, began her literary career by the end of the twentieth century. Naturally the World Wars fascinated her and her major focus was on the ruins of war and its long-term psychological implication on the soldiers. She has written fifteen remarkable novels, strongly claiming her place in the literary arena. "In all her works, there exists this tension between the material world beyond our control, the violence and trauma which come back to haunt us, and our persistent attempts to create meaning, to find hope by looking into the depths of despair" (Brannigan 2).

Barker is not predominantly a nature writer. However, in her novel *Double Vision* (2003), nature plays a major role, making it influential and metamorphosing to a character in itself. Her characters are influenced by nature and it is perceived that nature responds and reacts to the characters. In Literature, a setting plays a major role in the narration. It sets the tone and mood for the story and paves way for imagination and criticism. However, in rare instances, the setting itself takes the place of a character. The role of nature in Pat Barker's *Double Vision* cannot be passed off as a mere setting but to be considered a character with body, personality, soul and spirit. The environment in Barker's novel is a friend and a foe conditional to how the humans treat them, for it reacts and answers. "The land wanted to be left alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar kind of savage beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness," but as decades pass, the land appears an empathic friend as it "responds in kind. More than personified, the land becomes a rounded character in full relationship with man" ("Land as Literary Character"). In the famous novel *Songs of the Lark* by Willa Cather, for instance, the Arizonan landscape plays a significant role in the character Thea's life as it becomes "a source of her well-being and deep solace" (3).

In *Double Vision*, Barker predominantly juxtaposes the characters of Kate Frobisher and Stephen who on the common front mourn the loss of Ben. Ben is a war photographer, Kate's husband and Stephen's friend. Stephen relocates to the rural Northeast, at his brother Robert's cottage from his base in the urban London. Stephen believes that his move would help him heal from the trauma of losing his friend and also from his recent divorce. Though *Double Vision* is not set in the war zone, it is set in a land of rural Northeast which was affected by the foot-and-mouth disease that devastated the rural land. By placing the novel at a rural land which has seen the deaths of several thousands of animals from the epidemic, inherently, the novel becomes a critique of the pastoral. "Certainly Stephen finds a country-side in crisis. Boarded up shops and cafés, empty fields, strips of yellow just as nobody had bothered to remove the disinfectant mats that now lay at the entrance to every tourist attraction, bleached and baking in the sun" (Barker 201). In this sense, the rural landscape can also be termed as a 'wounded landscape' in which "Stephen is shocked to see scorched earth so close to the pastoral scene in which he is beginning to find peace" (Monteith, et al. 290). Barker does not snugly contrast the urban background with the rural background to which Stephen relocates. In the rural Northeast, Barker exposes that "cruel and random violence can strike" (Monteith, et al. 291)

In *Double Vision*, Stephen's young girlfriend, Justine is attacked by the burglars in the calm rural place on a bright sunny day making the rural space an equally dangerous and violent space. Like the urban environment, the rural landscape remains a 'wounded' or 'traumatised' land throughout the novel owing to the treacherous and self-centred human intervention. The novel begins with a brief description of the beautiful weather outside Kate's house on the Christmas eve, where she "cut off the main branches and dragged the trunk down to the compost heap at the bottom of the garden" (Barker

1) and “all round her the forest waited, humped in silence” (1). Interestingly, Kate meets with an accident right after she steps out of her house in her car on a slippery road. Barker describes how the nature in turn affects her as she hit the trees, the “trees loomed up, leapt towards her, branches shattered the windscreen, clawed at her eyes and throat. . . . One headlight shone at a strange angle, probing the thick resin smelling branches that had caught and netted the car” (3). For Kate, who had just cut off the branches of the tree hours before, the nature acts as a foe. This placement of the nature taking a violent turn could not be rubbed off as unintentionally situated by the author. Barker ‘could’ have intentionally placed these sequences so as to project that the intruded and wounded nature has its way of returning to the human space. Sueellen Campbell in the “Land and Language of Desire”, enlightens that “ecology insists that we pay attention not to the way things have meaning for us, but to the way the rest of the world - the nonhuman part - exists apart from us” (133).

This instance could be considered as Barker’s way of telling the readers that it is essential to understand the physical, emotional and moral connectedness of human beings with their environment even though they are unaware of each other’s existence. When Kate revisits the place after her recovery, she notices the tree and “the trunk had proved solid, though the roots had been disturbed. She looked down and saw how they’d been prised loose from the earth” (Barker 13). Barker uses the phrase Kate ‘looked down upon the tree’ which signifies how the humankind always looks down upon the nature and their environment which in turn disturbs and shakes the rootedness of the natural environment. Through this insignificant instance for the plot, Barker nevertheless projects how the root of the tree is disturbed by the accident caused by human beings and their machines (automobiles). Kate recovers from the accident, but the tree remains uprooted, shaken and ‘wounded’, never able to recover from the man-caused disaster as a ‘traumatised tree’. In *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), Buell deliberates “place having by definition both an objective and a subjective face, pointing outward toward the tangible world and inward to the perceptions one brings to it” (59). This ‘elusiveness of place’ according to Buell, is reflected in the traumatised environment that Kate witnesses.

Jonathan Bate in his *Romantic Ecology* proposes that “Everything is linked to everything else, and, most importantly, the human mind must be linked to the natural environment” (2). The undeniable impact of a memorable place on the human mind is explored by many critics. Edward O. Wilson reiterates the similar notion adding that “this place identity is a sub-structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of broadly conceived cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives” (x). As much as the human-human relationship is significant, so is the human-nature relationship and the nature interacts, responds, receives and gives back like a human personality.

Barker has been a constant critique of war throughout her oeuvre and in *Double Vision*, though she sets the tone in a pastoral setting, she yet again creates an anti-war novel by curating a ‘wounded and traumatised land’. Barker, thoughtfully brings in an image of an apocalyptic world to warn the readers of what would be left if the world continues to be obsessed with warfare. The image of sun veiled in mist is a harbinger of darkness that is to come if the world and the eco-system is destroyed by war and violence. Kate looks at Ben’s photographs and contemplates how the images of the rural England are as dark and violent as the war photographs:

Fenland, waterland, brown tarns in gorse-covered hills, snow light, water light – all with the same brooding darkness in them. They were supposed to be peaceful, these photographs, a break from the subjects he spent most of his life pursuing, but they weren’t. You always knew, looking at these empty fields, these miles of white sand with marram grass waving in the wind, that somewhere, close at hand, but outside the frame, a murder had been committed. (Barker 65)

In this perspective, Barker uses the natural setting as a reflection of the dark traumatic occurrence of war. The violence, death and horrors are reflected through the natural setting of both

urban and rural alike. The popular critic of Barker's works, Sharon Monteith observes that "Barker compares dark natural places with the dark places in the psyche" (293). Like humans with psyche, the nature in Barker's novels also reflect the darkness throughout the novel. As a regular protagonist, the land in Barker's novel also possesses a sense of time. By using the description of dragon teeth, a debris from the war, the author uses the Land to show the passing of time and its remains.

Stephen came out from between the houses, he saw the sea. He started to walk on the beach in deep fine, unpolluted sand, until he came to a row of 'dragons' teeth': gigantic blocks of concrete scattered along the edge of the dunes in a rough line like a child's bricks. Tank traps – the detritus of the last war. They were covered with graffiti: NFC RULES, SUNDERLAND ARE WANKERS. (Barker 303-304)

In Barker's novels, the nature, in many instances, reflects the human characteristics. She describes the natural space of the sky as "a deep turquoise, and the starlings were beginning to gather, huge folds and swathes of them coiling, spiralling, circling, and everywhere their clicks and chattering, as insistent as cicadas" (Barker 141). At once, she continues to describe the human space, "Beneath this frenzy, another frenzy of people rushing home from work, shopping; young people setting off for a night out; girls, half naked, standing in shop doorways" (141). This parallel description of the Land as traumatised makes it obvious how the natural world and human world are no different but the natural world is a character in their own right in her novel, possessing the characteristics of humankind.

Barker, by placing the nature as an equally strong, emotional force to its human characters, makes it a traumatised character in the novel. With the recent ecological crisis all over the globe, such as deforestation, global warming and industrialisation there has been a larger environmental concern in the recent decades. Addressing and responding to this global concern, the paper asserts that Barker's work of Literature, by placing the nature as a character necessitates the involved response and reaction of the reader which in turn will create a heightened awareness and nature consciousness. Barker's *Double Vision* ascertains that Literature indeed is a representation of the environment and is a mirror of life.

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