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## **Towards a Critique of Anthropocentrism: The Case of Andrew Marvell**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*Global eco-imbalance is the common phenomenon of the to-day's world. Man-centric philosophies blinded men seeking luxury all around. They don't care about others' comfort. Man exploited nature with eyes shut. The result is eco-crises. Andrew Marvell in his poems glorifies the innocence of nature. He castigated the then scientific developments. He saw everywhere a craze for hybridization. The scientific developments looted the purity and originality, and made everything artificial. According to Marvell, people's happiness depends on his/her relation with*

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*nature. If he/she is in tune with nature, he/she can enjoy life full. In the article the present author has made an attempt to trace out eco-centric visions of Marvell.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Anthropocentrism; eco-centrism; eco-feminism.*

The available literature on Andrew Marvell's poetry either addresses political, religious, technical excellence, or historical overtones and undertones. Very few Marvellian scholars have taken the issues of gender, sexuality, and ecology seriously to my knowledge and belief. Nigel Smith, Bruce King, Michael Craze, A.D. Cousins and numerous others are mainly interested in the explication of theological allusions, allegories, and analogues and reestablishing him as a poet of first water. However their in-depth studies on Andrew Marvell's poetry refashioned him. Even Nigel Smith goes to the extent of declaring him better than John Donne. It's my conviction that a study of Marvell's poetry from the vantage point of eco-centrism is quite novel and promising as it holds possibility to take one to other versions of nature oriented philosophies. My attempt is one of them. His representations of nature carry some specific purpose. His vision of nature rectifies man and nature relation. It is quite different from earlier insights into Marvell scholarship. Since eco-centrism is the need of time, my work might prove path-breaking.

Anthropocentrism refers to a system of belief that man is the center of all of things in the universe. It takes man and nature as two separate regions. The latter is only subordinate to the former. During pre-Socrates era, two schools of thought come to the fore; one, believed that man had no distinction over other creatures like worms, animals etc. and the other known as the Sophists (a group of teachers and philosophers in 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) position man on the top of hierarchy. More or less the Sophists tradition continued through Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Then, the Stoics came over with novel ideology. The Stoics subordinated man to the universal

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laws of nature. He should go alongside nature. Rene Descartes in 17<sup>th</sup> century told that mind and body are two entities and the former rules over the latter. His dualism ensures man's superiority over other non-humans as man is the sole possessor of rationality. The Judeo-Christian tradition signs man's superiority over non-human beings and plants. All natural resources are for the betterment of men. Carolyn Merchant writes:

The new image of nature as a female to be controlled and dissected through experiment legitimated the exploitation of natural resources. Although the image of the nurturing earth popular in the Renaissance did not vanish, it was superseded by new controlling imagery. The constraints against penetration associated with the earth-mother image were transformed into sanction for denudation (Merchant 189).

In reaction to anthropocentric philosophies, ecocentrism arose. Ecocentrism places ecosystem at the centre (not in terms of space) rather than humanity. The survival of humanity is altogether at the mercy of ecosystem. Another wing of this trajectory of thought is 'ecofeminism'. Ecofeminists oppose androcentric dualism, that is, man and woman are two thinking machines but not equally powerful. The latter is the weaker machine. Ecofeminists claim that men exploited women and nature simultaneously. Both are co-sufferers. As 'anthropocentrism' othered nature, women were othered by 'androcentrism'. Androcentrism refers to a system of beliefs and ways that favours men over women.

Andrew Marvell's nature poetry belongs to the tradition of pastoral poetry. The pastoral poetry generally engages rural settings far from the maddening crowd and artificiality of city and court. Such sets have healing effects. M. H. Abrams tries to generalize the pastoral business in his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. He writes that the term 'pastoral' is applied "to any work

which represents a withdrawal to a place apart that is close to the elemental rhythms of nature, where the protagonist achieves a new perspective on the complexities, frustrations, and conflicts of the social world” (Abrams 203). About the prime importance of pastoral tradition, Greg Garrard writes:

Since the Romantic Movement’s poetic responses to the Industrial Revolution, pastoral has decisively shaped our constructions of nature. Even the science of ecology may have been shaped by pastoral in its early stages of development and we have seen that the founding text of ecocriticism, *Silent Spring*, drew on the pastoral tradition. No other trope is so deeply entrenched in Western culture, or so deeply problematic for environmentalism. With its roots in the classical period, pastoral has shown itself to be infinitely malleable for differing political ends, and potentially harmful in its tensions and evasions. However, its long history and cultural ubiquity mean that the pastoral trope must and will remain a key concern for ecocritics (Garrard 33).

Andrew Marvell’s pastoral poems acquire more importance in the world facing eco-crises. His nature poems are not sheer celebrations of flowers, plants, and orchards. He exposes the callousness, blindness of men towards nature. The seventeenth century is also known for change in power centers. New farming techniques, trade, and industry flourished. The new economic order shifted power hubs from the House of Lords to the House of Commons. This development in economy also made ‘anthropocentrism’ stronger. Marvell made use of nature to give vent to love, religion, satire etc. He denigrates anthropocentric attitudes in several of his poems. The important among them are “The Garden”, “The Mower against Gardens”, “Damon the Mower”, “The Mower’s Song”, “The Picture of Little T. C. in A Prospect of Flowers”, “The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Faun”, “Upon the Hill and Grove at Bilbrough” etc.

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Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" is not an ordinary garden where we generally visit. This is a garden with divine sparks. Here, everything is in abundance. Marvell contrasts the innocence and beauty of nature with the cunningness of money-minded men who only look for benefits. They don't care for nature or environment's loss and decay. At the very outset of the poem, the poet launches a tirade against 'anthropocentrism'. In the garden, trees and flowers are in communion to provide the feelings of solace and comfort who don't hanker for material success in favour of beauty and innocence of garden. But 'anthropocentric' men are running after material pursuits. They foolishly surprise "to win the palm, the oak, or bays" (2) after great waste of labor and destruction. By ancient Greeks, the leaves of palm, oak, and bays were used to crown victorious warriors, great rulers, and outstanding poets. Their toils' prices are restricted to "short and narrow verged shadow" (5) of these leaves. These worldly successful men reject the value of the full trees and flowers in the garden. They surprise to achieve mere leaves of "some single herb or tree" (4). It is all due to their 'anthropocentric' consciousness.

The poet alongside worldly people tells that he has mistaken long assuming beauty in the company of busy men. Sheer quietness and innocence, the poet finds in the garden. Here, "delicious solitude" can be savored when one is all alone instead of a crowd. The poet finds men and society anti-nature:

Society is all but rude.

To this delicious solitude.

No white nor red was ever seen

So am'rous as this lovely green.

Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,

Cut in these trees their mistress' name.

Little, alas, they know, or heed,

How far these beauties hers exceed!

Fair trees! Wheres'e'er your barks I wound,

No name shall but your own be found. ( Lines: 15-24)

To prove the supposition that nature is lovelier than lady love, Marvell echoes Greek mythology of Apollo-Daphne and Pan-Syrinx. It is said that whenever gods fell in love with some mortal beauty. They turn them into nature. Apollo turned Daphne into laurel and Pan changed Syrinx into a reed only not in any form of nymph. This shows that gods honor nature. Then, the poet lapses into the glorification of the garden. But, the poet says that the divine facilities made available by nature, worldly men cannot enjoy unless or until they learn to live with nature. Finally, Marvell comes to the conclusion that the "wondrous life" (33) in the garden cannot be equated with few leaves and flowers: "How could such sweet and wholesome hours/ Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers? (1). In the poem "The Mower against Gardens", Marvell presents mower a lustful and corrupt man. The poet criticizes mower who queers nature by his vicious habits and skills. All the natural order is spoiled entirely, and the worst of it is that all the flowers and trees are shown grotesque due to hybridization in color and kind. The mower sees nature through his lustful eyes:

Luxurious man, to bring his vice in use,

Did after him the world seduce:

And from the field the flowers and plants allure,

Where Nature was most plain and pure. (1-4)

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The mower is an imperfect artist but his dreams are to see the world as per his visions. With an intention to change the pristine character of nature the mower applied over dose of fertilizer and transplanted somewhere from the garden (birth land):

He first enclosed within the gardens square

A dead and standing pool of air,

And a more luscious earth for them did knead,

Which stupefied them while it fed. ( 5-8)

The result of mower's toil was that everything became utterly unnatural. The pink grew deceitful; extra application of nutriment changed its type; and the strange smell of this new flower lessened the value of rose. Once natural things were of great value and honor but new developments in science and technology brought artificiality to the fore. Even it became quite difficult to identify the kind or type of a plant or flower. The poet sighs:

Had he not dealt between the bark and tree,

Forbidden mixtures there to see.

No plant now knew the stock from which it came;

He grafts upon the wild the tame:

That th'uncertain and adulterate fruits

Might put the palate in dispute; ( 21-26)

Scientifically induced men brought disaster on the natural course of nature. Marvell condemned such corrupt practices. In fact Marvell found men of his time bitterly 'anthropocentric' which he disapproved always. He did not like any kind of meddle with natural order of nature. He found

nature innocent and ever ready to pour out riches naturally for humanity. In the poem man is depicted 'luxurious' and 'tyrant'. He is 'luxurious' because his perception of nature is in terms of his sexuality; and 'tyrant' in the sense that he meddled with the natural course of nature and tried to impose a new shape and color. By the implication, it is stressed in the poem that people's crazy pursuit of exotic culture brought all kinds of abnormality in the nature. The mower spoiled purity and innocence of nature.

Marvell's another effective poem "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn" contrasts the innocence of nature and girlhood with cruelty, corruption, and deceitfulness of man. The nymph may be a semi-divine maiden or a young human girl. She expresses her deep anguish over her pet fawn having been fired by civil war soldiers. She fondly recalls her lover Sylvio who had handed her the fawn as a token of love. The nymph found both Sylvio and war soldiers ungentle. Sylvio deserted the nymph and soldiers shot the fawn. She curses:

The wanton troopers riding by  
Have shot my fawn, and it will die.  
Ungentle men! They cannot thrive-  
To kill thee! Thou ne'er didst alive  
Them any harm: alas, nor could  
Thy death yet do them any good. (Lines: 1-6)

The nymph firmly says that Heaven's King keep the record of each and every act of men. These cruel men cannot get rid of their bloody hands despite innumerable attempts:

E'en beasts must be with justice slain,  
Else men are made their deodands.



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Though they should wash their guilty hands  
In this warm life-blood, which doth part  
From thine, and wound me to the heart,  
Yet could they not be clean: their stain  
Is dyed in such a purple grain,  
There is not such another in  
The world, to offer for their sin. (Lines: 15-24)

In the poem, the poet sought to show off men as unreliable, cruel, and indifferent towards innocent animals. This is biocentric attitude of Andrew Marvell. At the end of the poem, the nymph prefers death and to be identified with the fawn to suffer in her violated garden. She thinks death the only way to resolve the corruption of the fallen world.

In the poem “The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers”, Marvell depicts Little T. C. as a foster child of nature, and ‘virtuous enemy of man’:

This nymph begins her golden days!  
In the green grass she loves to lie,  
And there with her fair aspect tames  
The wilder flowers, and gives them names:  
But only with the roses plays;  
... ..  
Who can foretell for what high cause  
This Darling of the Gods was born! (Lines: 2-10)

The poet believes that the survival of Little T. C. amid flowers and plants is possible as long as there is amity between her and nature. If nature sustains any kind of injury via her, she will get vindictive and wreak havoc:

But, O young beauty of the woods,  
Whom Nature courts with fruits and flowers,  
Gather the flowers, but spare the buds,  
Lest Flora angry at thy crime,  
To kill her infants in their prime, (Lines: 33-37)

By implication, it can be said that we all are foster-beings of nature. Human life will continue receiving sustenance till it is along with nature. Otherwise, Flore the pastoral Goddess will ‘nip in the blossom all our hopes and thee’ (40).

In “The Mower’s Song”, the speaker laments his inability to continue being with nature. He fondly recall his by-gone days when he used to enjoy meadows, flowers, grasses, May-games, rainfall etc. These were then his companions. But everything occurred later on otherwise. The speaker accuses Juliana for taking him away from nature. Juliana may be taken for materialism. It detracted him and severed his warm relationship with nature. In the concluding lines, the poet writes:

And thus, ye meadows, which have been  
Companions of my thoughts more green,  
Shall now the heraldry become  
With which I will adorn, my tomb;

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For Juliana comes, and she

What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me. (Lines: 25-30)

Marvell's "The Mower to the Glowworms" is a sheer celebration of glowworms. The mower finds nightingales sitting late due to the presence of glowworms' 'dear light'. The 'dear light' of glowworms promises only hope and nothing untoward. Even they serve wandering mowers by showing them their paths:

Ye glowworms, whose officious fame

To wandering mowers shows the way,

That in the night have lost their aim,

And after foolish fires do stray; (Lines: 9-12)

To mower, the grand light of glowworms is of no use as he is already dissuaded from the nature under the influence of hard core materialism:

Your courteous lights in vain you waste,

Since Juliana here is come.

For she my mind hath so displaced

That I shall never find my home. (Lines: 13-16)

In the poem "Damon the Mower", Marvell shows Mower's unfriendly and estranged relationship with nature as the first stanza depicts:

Hark how the Mower Damon sung,

With love of Juliana stung!

While everything did seem to paint  
The scene more fit for his complaint.  
Like her fair eyes the day was fair,  
But scorching like his am'rous care,  
Sharp like his scythe his sorrow was,  
And withered like his hopes the grass.

(Lines: 1-8)

The mower loves Juliana keenly. Out of frustration in love, he whets his love for Juliana but it is all fruitless. He hurts nature without fear of retribution at the hands of Juliana. She hurts him more powerfully than nature: "Not July causeth these extremes,/ But Juliana's scorching beams. (23-24) The mower is altogether indifferent towards nature. Just as the mower hurts nature without any sympathy, so Juliana inflicts pain on him:

And with my Sythe cut down the Grass,  
Yet still my Grief is where it was:  
But, when the Iron blunter grows,  
Sighing I whet my Syche and Woes.'

(Lines: 69-72)

Juliana's sheer indifference towards him prompts to commit suicide as suggested in the lines: "And there among the grass fell down, / By his own scythe, the Mower mown" (79-80). In the end, the mower comes to the conclusion that the wounds received at the hands of Juliana are incurable. He only can integrate into nature via death. From now, he gets friendly towards nature. The implication is that the destiny of man is shaped and designed by nature. Nature has always an upper edge on mankind.

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In the end it can be safely concluded that Andrew Marvell was above Western materialism. He had been quite conscious about nature and its role in man and other being's life. His poems are quite relevant and inspiring in today's world facing global eco-imbalances. His poems prove that man's survival is possible as long as he/she is in communion with nature. His nature poems are not simply celebrations of nature. My selection of Marvell's poems justly claims that beliefs that approve man's supremacy over nature are baseless and vain.

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