Book Review: *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* by Timothy Clark. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015

In literary criticism, the term 'ecocriticism' is employed to capture the various aspects of the relation between literature and environment; it "expresses a desire to bring to the study of literature the concerns of ecopolitics" (Egan 33-34). Timothy Clark brings together his expertise in philosophy, literature and literary theory in addressing the question of ecocriticism, giving directions as well as discussing the possible challenges this task might encounter. He is dissatisfied equally with the global capitalist thinking that least bothers about the earth, with the anthropocentric tendencies inherent in postcolonial thinking, with the romanticists who want to preserve the forest and with the progressives interested in the rights of oppressed groups insofar as the solution each camp suggests does not first understand the intellectual challenges set forth by the recognition of the anthropocene epoch (12-13).

Ecocriticism is still in its formative stage and what Clark's deconstructive approach offers is preparatory thinking required to shape the course of its development that takes into consideration the essential limitations of humans as well as the ironic possibilities it offers (Clark "The Deconstructive Turn"). To make sense of Clark's work, we first need to know that his point of view is inspired by questions beyond the contextual, historical or cultural; in other words, he is motivated by the meta-contextual induction of the anthropocene. For instance, bio-sphere is no longer the factor in the background as in the received mode of thinking and praxis, but is visible, resulting in the derangement of the normal categories of thought and practice, and creating the condition for a fundamental shift in human perception and understanding (Clark *Introduction to Literature and the Environment* 1-14). At the meta-contextual level, thinking has to deal with so many things such as ethics, morality, geography, politics and animal rights simultaneously, even if it leads to tensions, confusions, and contradictions (Clark *Introduction to Literature and the Environment* 203-204). E. F. Schumacher's work *Small is Beautiful* (1973), anticipated the need for the meta-contextual inquiry. It problematizes presuppositions in the field of economics such as unlimited bargaining and hunting in the operations of the market economy. Further, it calls attention to the fundamental relations of production, distribution, and exchange of finite nature (e.g., land) inspired by the Buddhist thought of interdependence and co-existence (Schumacher 46-50). Similarly, Clark in *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, calls for the fundamental change in environmental criticism and to go beyond the traditional intellectual practices (contextual, cultural or historical) that "gave its own procedures and objects relative separateness and coherence" (197). Only if the "emergent nature of scale effects" breaks the intellectual domination of cultural representations as the agent there is a possibility of a place for post-human agency in "an epoch of humanity as the just and responsible steward of the Earth." (198)

What interests Clark in the concept of the Anthropocene as he writes in the first chapter is not its status of official recognition by scientists, but interpreting it as a scale of effects, acting as a threshold in the humanities, especially in literary criticism. For instance, in the second chapter, he discusses how the image of the earth as recorded from the space outside of the earth (the 1968 Apollo photographs) evokes a range of meaning from "symbol of human achievement in the modern epoch" to symbol of "unbearable fragility." (30) The image of the earth that gives rise to various imaginations of the whole earth differs according to the particular scale and complex disjunctions involved in that perceptual scale. The image of the earth from outside, which is of a larger scale, is in conflict with the phenomenological experience of the earth, which in turn destabilizes our perceptual experience (35). What is considered to be normal and familiar is guided by the terrestrial norm of perception and the same becomes something disturbing in the literary readings of Planet Earth. For instance, in the reading of Armstrong, Anders, and Serres it creates a "discontinuity" and "leaps over" in perception, even paralysing or deranging the readers in the light of the global environmental crisis. This image is then extended to literary texts, as the author demonstrates in the third chapter, by taking the short poem by Gary Snyder ("Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout")

from his collection *Riprap* (1959), how the thought of the Anthropocene brings about a different experience of unreadability due to the "effect of radical and unpredictable emergence" (47) at an unusually large and complex scale. It is easy to fix the awareness that comes out of a reflective engagement with the Anthropocene as a narrow, provincial thinking exercise, rather than viewing the deficiencies and limitations as something that emerges due to the scale effects (62). Clark's own words to show how "scale effect" is pivotal in characterizing the equation between the Anthropocene and ecocriticism are: "The Anthropocene is itself an emergent 'scale effect'. That is, at a certain, indeterminate threshold, numerous human actions, insignificant in themselves (heating a house, clearing trees, flying between the continents, forest management) come together to form a new, imponderable physical event, altering the basic ecological cycles of the planet." (72)

According to the author, scale as a structural feature of any reading is so important, but it is inconspicuous, and so reflective and expressive deliberation is a must to bring it to view. His concrete demonstration of 'scale effects', taking the issue of population in the fourth chapter, shows how slash-and-burn method of farming is sustainable when population density is low and the same results in destruction of the environment when it is beyond a threshold limit (84). He emphasizes the interesting fact that what appears to be a difficult decision, whether to walk instead of driving a car, which involves suffering at a personal scale, emerge as meaningful decision when the impact of it on the environment at the larger scale is considered. Thus the operation of scale-framing at three levels—critically at a naive individual level, culturally or historically, which is the most employed scale-framing level in literary criticism, and hypothetically at the impersonal scale at which ecological dynamics become noticeable—are not mutually exclusive but can be contradictory. It seems to me that Clark's most important contribution comes from his reading of Raymond Carver's short story titled "Elephant" (1998) in the fifth chapter at the hypothetical scale (the largest and most complex of the three scales), which clearly presents how the scale implicates the meaning and significance of reading and most importantly expresses disproportionate effects of the third scale that perhaps doesn't even make any sense or give us any knowledge about what to do, as the criterion for judgement does not come from within the scale itself (99). He, however, observes that there is difficulty and helplessness that emerge in the third scale because "*not* to read at this scale is now become an evasion." (101)

The review finds the author's characterization of the emergence of unconscious aspects that come into being at the third scale reading and which brings an "*unframing*" effect upon other familiar scales, leading to the need to rethink the place of the human being in relation to nature (104) a very pertinent insight. Thus he marks the negative significance of the third scale reading of the "Elephant", beyond the ethical or political framework: "a kind of non-anthropic irony deranges the short story as an easily assimilable object of any given kind of moral or political reading" (106-7). If extrapolated, the scalar reading of the "Elephant," shows also what the 'ecophobia' in Simon Estok's reading of the seventeenth century texts of Shakespeare would mean today, given the more complicated scale effects in the epoch of the Anthropocene: "*an antipathy, dismissive stance or sheer indifference towards the natural environment, including attitudes which, however understandable in the past, tend now in the emergent contexts of the Anthropocene to become directly or indirectly destructive, even in ways that may not have been the case before.*" (111) Clark continues the reading experiment in the sixth chapter with Henry Lawson's poem "*Telling Mrs Baker*" (1901), an Australian text, to expose the inherent anthropocentric elements in the postcolonial reading by juxtaposing it with a reading of the same text at the hypothetical scale with the awareness of the Anthropocene.Clark also criticizes thinkers like Timothy Morton and others, who represent the stream of material ecocriticism in the seventh chapter. He finds material ecocriticism fruitful insofar as they recognise the "agencial effect of matter" but criticises the operation of ethical truism and the urge to revive the ethical compassion for the "other" (147) because it forecloses the possibilities in the way of the anthropocene disorder, i.e., to embrace the loss of order, lack of proportionality, and breakdown of intellectual standards (146).

Following it in the eight chapter, Clark elaborates the dynamic manners in which the anthropocene disorder occurs by way of unacknowledged denial in environmental criticism, one which is based on psychic defence that manifests in the form of emotionless thing-like zombification of humans (160). Another kind of denial that he exposes is very relevant in the developed countries, where they talk superficially about the environment but never act for the environment. Finally, in the ninth chapter, he construes the problem of anthropological trap in the discourse of climate change in the aesthetic realm of ecocriticism due to the deep addiction to certain kind of psychological narrative structures jeopardizing the very purpose of its producing such literary work. This ultimately raises the question of the nature of art in the epoch of the Anthropocene, suggesting the motif needed to overcome the anthropocentric tendencies in venturing imaginative fictions appropriate for representing the emergent complexities in the third scale, even if it means giving up the technique of engaging readers with immediate emotional interests (181). He concludes the book highlighting the tension between thinking and praxis of ecocriticism, also stressing the need for a direct kind of activism by engaging with the delusion of self-importance and challenging the limits of cultural representation.

Answering the question on the possible link between the post-human conception of the human and the emerging meaning of what is literary when it is informed by the Anthropocene epoch, Timothy Clark notes that the Zombification (becoming-simulative / craving for distraction) and passive denial of climate change indicates that humans as a species is developing a numbness or lack of affectedness (Aquila and Clark). One of the understandable limitations of this book is that the choice of the literary texts used in the analysis did not include texts from Asian countries like India, where environmental movements are taking place. The book is strongly recommended for those who are interested generally in literature and environment, and particularly for those interested in ecocriticism. Overall Clark's book is a valuable contribution to ecocriticism scholarship for its thought-provoking critique on various existing stream of intellectual thoughts ranging from conservative to progressive philosophy including postcolonial thinking.

Works Cited

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