



OSLE-India newsletter

ORGANISATION FOR STUDIES IN LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT-INDIA

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Editorial

Rohini Ramakrishnan

"If we destroy the environment we commit suicide. The warning signs have been noted." - Dr. CA Cranston.

OSLE-India "works" as a healing centre, as scientific and artistic minds come together to nurture the environment in their own specific field and more to bring awareness to others. This particular newsletter serves a rich fare and gives an opportunity to look back and gain strength from what OSLE-India means to you and what more can you give to it in future.

Happy Birthday, OSLE-India Study Circle. Wishing you many more fruitful years.

From the Secretary's desk . . .

Rayson K. Alex

OSLE-India is fast growing. ASLE-US, after comparing the membership profile of all its affiliates have observed that OSLE-India is the largest ecocritical body in the world, promoting ecocriticism, after ASLE-US. Quality not quantity determines the functioning of OSLE-India and this is evident in the regularity of the work done. OSLE-India has been regular in holding Study Circles and publishing newsletters. All the participants of OSLE-India Study Circle had gathered for the celebration of its first anniversary and a souvenir was released on that day. The celebration was dedicated to trees. After laborious work, the camera-ready copy of IJE (*Indian Journal of Ecocriticism*) has been sent to our publisher. It is expected to be released in September 2008. I wish to thank and appreciate all the officers and members of OSLE-India, who were instrumental in its growth.

“Discussing ‘Nature’ as a Construction”: An Interview with Dr. CA Cranston
S.Susan Deborah & Rayson K. Alex

Dr. CA is currently with the Department of English, University of Tasmania. Her areas of expertise include Australian literature, British Romantics, Victorian Novel and American Nature Writing. Her varied teaching experience includes a short stint at the University of Madras, Chennai, India. CA has many teaching awards and it is also interesting to note that she has a background in media studies with an M.A. (Hons) in Communications from the University of Texas, Austin. CA has several academic publications, articles and chapters in journals and books to her credit. She has held various academic positions and is part of a number of academic bodies. She is currently serving as the Editor and online compiler of ASLE-ANZ *ANewZletter* (Association for the study of literature and the environment-Australia and New Zealand).



(S. Susan Deborah & Rayson K. Alex - SR; Dr. CA Cranston - CA)

SR: How did you get interested in ecocriticism and how different is it from other theories like structuralism, modernism, etc?

CA: You start big. We could have one or two conferences on that topic. Speaking in the world of written languages, ecocriticism by its approach embraces the diversity offered by literary theory, seeing them as interrelated, as ideas *evolving* from history and politics. But if ecocriticism is concerned with the relation of literature *and* the environment then the particular theories it engages with must cross into that boundary. So structuralism, which concerns itself with the codification of communication, is useful to ecocriticism in its study of the ‘physical’ language of zoo semiotics. For instance, one of my favourite eco-novels, Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* is spun from scent: the scent of a moth, of wolves, of ovulating women. And again, Barthes’ ‘grammar’ of clothes can be applied ecocritically in the changing signification of ‘cotton’: once interpreted as friendly alternatives to petro-chemical derivatives like polyester, cotton is now read in environmental terms as a demon consumer of water resources. (consult Sue Ellen Campbell and Guattari who have done work on the deep ecology / post-structuralism nexus).



On the one hand it’s easy to forget there’s anything outside the text once one begins the process of deconstruction; on the other hand, that we are in the ‘post’ phase of structuralism and modernism demonstrates the evolutionary process of ideas (Frank Kermode even has a ‘paleomodernism’ category!). It’s possible to engage fully and happily within these frameworks and not give a hoot for the second part of the equation that ecocriticism is mindfully concerned about. There was a time when academics were discussing ‘nature’ as a construction; it’s even been mooted that we are in the ‘post-nature’ phase: I like Bishop Berkeley’s detractor and Edward Abbey’s “refute that”

response (a dent in the shin with a rock) which calls into play a bodily experience of the world.

SR: Can you tell us about your responsibility in ASLE-ANZ (Australia and New Zealand)?

CA: Very little, most of the time. I am frantic for a few days compiling items and formatting the *ASLE-AnewZletter*, a biannual e-publication. I was fortunate enough to represent ASLE-ANZ at the Spartanburg conference in 2007, where I delivered a paper; publicised my forthcoming book, and wrote the conference report (newsletter #5). I am a member of three of the ASLE organisations as my interest is in USA and British literature as well as Australian. (And I'm gaining a great appreciation for Tamil literature, the longer I am here!)

SR: How do you approach ecocriticism—do you view it as praxis-oriented or an intellectual engagement?

CA: Both. But if we can get back to the 'roots' of its development, it began from a need to engage with praxis, to acknowledge and act upon perceived apathy and discipline 'redundancy' in a time of environmental crises. It's not a requirement to hike into the bush (and 'disturb' the ecosystem, some might say), any more than it is to be a feminist if one teaches feminisms, or a Marxist if one teaches Marxist theory. But it helps. And actual engagement in the environment increases local knowledge and lends integrity to discussions about 'the outside world.'

SR: What is the importance of 'place' to you as an ecocritic?

CA: For 'me', and for me as an 'ecocritic,' place is exceedingly important, especially participating in the local 'place,' wherever that happens to be. To be place-centric is also important of course: to be able to observe changes in the biome—fewer birds this year; more of a particular invasive weed, that sort of thing—as it provides valuable early warning to alternations in local patterns. But getting to know the locale in which one currently placed is especially essential in this time of mobile populations; developing a concern for 'other' environments even if they are not the environments of 'home.'

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SR: What is the scope of being a biocentric person in today's world? Can ecocriticism work in today's context?

CA: Two questions. Let me start with the last which seems a little anachronistic. Ecocriticism arose out of a deep concern for the dissonance between the relative stability and introversion offered by 'inhabiting' texts, and the glaring discrepancy between that and the external crises going on in the world. Ecocriticism was an attempt to make active—not only academic—sense of the growing dissonance between reading and writing in the

world, and living in a depleting world. So for the second part of your question, ‘what is the scope of being a biocentric in today’s world’? Infinite and imperative. Someone whose name escapes me made the simple observation that as organisms we are dependent on the environment; if we destroy the environment we commit suicide. The warning signs have been noted.

SR: You have diverse interests and engagements; does being an ecocritic influence all the various spheres of your engagements?

CA: As much as that is possible. I’m sure there are lapses due to habit. In India (if I might bring in a large ‘local’!) I chose a room without a/c; use a bucket to wash rather than shower, and wash clothes in that water: small energy and water-saving actions that stem from the local. On observing the South Indian diet, I see a general preference for vegetarianism, which puts to rest some of the issues ecologists and environmentalists face in the west—factory farming, land use, and so on. That doesn’t mean that the local has a good animal record: in the city, chickens live a miserable life; and I’m not envious of the lot of the temple elephant. In the wild, the Gharial, river dolphins, and dugongs aren’t faring well, to put it mildly. It’s interesting to see the role of animals here in their manifestation as various gods and goddesses. In some ways (and I would like to be corrected here) it’s possible to see in urban areas, such as Chennai, the economy /ecology dialectic: as if some worshippers / believers have lost touch with origins and are content with representation. So I guess my answer to your question is that ecocriticism informs my frame of reference but that same frame of reference would need to be modified once a deeper experience of the local (the referent) is gained.

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SR: As ASLE believes in interdisciplinarity, how far has ASLE-ANZ been able to bring academicians from other disciplines? How does it work?

CA: Interdisciplinarity is reflected by the ASLE-ANZ executive. Kate Rigby, the President, is a Germanist and a philosopher; Mark Tredinnick, the Vice President, is an ex-lawyer and current creative writer; Charles Dawson, VP (New Zealand) is a writer, and a government employee. It’s at the conferences where exciting cross-disciplinary (and cross-fertilization) occurs. As a nascent organisation, ASLE-ANZ is working on establishing those links. When we get vulcanologists and forest canopy experts to give papers (as ASLE-USA did, recently) it will reinforce the inter-relatedness of the critical method, and address the articulation necessary between University departments which are predominantly fragmented.

SR: Does ASLE-Australia encourage exchange programmes for students from other countries? What are the provisions for this in ASLE-Australia?

CA: ASLE-ANZ is an ‘association’ scattered across Australia and New Zealand. So exchange programs are beyond its purview and its pocket.

SR: As a member of ASLE-ANZ do you see students from India coming to Australia for purposes of research in interdisciplinary studies, comparative studies, the study of Indigenous people, etc.,? Is any scholarship or funding available / provided by ASLE?

CA: Re: the last part of your question: no, ASLE is not involved in academic accreditation. Students from India already engage in research projects, at varying levels of support, with Universities where there is a MoU or any other form of linkage; the Australia-India Council also supports scholars from Indian universities. Universities also advertise Ph.D scholarships in specific research areas. After all, India shares with Australia a history of colonization by the British, and it shares the Indian Ocean. There are numerous points of contiguity.

SR: Can you tell us about your stint in India—the experiences, the food, the people, the culture shock, etc.? How did you prepare yourself for this visit to India?

CA: You’re assuming shock. What if I were to tell you that I felt very much ‘in place’ during my stay here? The first word spoken in my new ‘home’ was Tamil; to speak otherwise seemed to indicate a dis-engagement with culture. As for food: I am a coeliac which means I can’t eat gluten, a protein in all grain except rice and corn. So I am able to eat almost everything that figures in the South Indian diet, with the exception of chapattis, parathas and so on. In the western world, where the diet is primarily wheat, I am *excluded* from socialisation. So at the primary level of appetite Tamil Nadu and I are made for each other! As for the people: I continue to be ‘bowled over’ by the friendliness of the folk. My having a white face has proven to be somewhat of an attraction (in the circus sense) as school children shake hands, introduce themselves, and find my appearance generally amusing. The colleagues are helpful and formidable. I couldn’t have asked for a more interesting or inspiring place to ‘land’ than Southern India.

SR: What is your dream with regard to ecocriticism (something you have not ventured into), from the perspective of one who has been active in the field for a couple of years? What do you plan to do for it?

CA: My dream? Partly realised, academically, with the release of Australia’s first collection of ecocritical essays (*The Littoral Zone*, Rodopi Press, 2007). I have been active in the field for about 10 years, with my first ecocritical article published in 2000. The book is a start, a way of getting the word out, and into Australian academic discourse. With people like Tim Flannery (*The Future Eaters*; *The Weather Makers*) being proclaimed ‘Australian of the Year 2007’, the time is right to keep the discussions lively and relevant. Al Gore recruited a number of people from around the world, including Australia, to inform groups about the politics and statistics of climate change. Few of us have the high profiles of Flannery, Gore, Bill McKibben, Carolyn Merchant or Val Plumwood, but as academics in institutions we *are* in a position to articulate ideas.

And though universities are by nature (if I may use that term) slow moving, technology has helped speed the process and spread the ideas. So, as another small contribution to the field of ecocriticism, I developed an on-line American Nature Writing course which represented various theoretical positions. That's what academics in literary studies can do, and do—highlight ways of reading texts and point out the positive and negative aspects resulting from representations of nature.

You say I haven't 'ventured into' my dream regarding ecocriticism. I'll answer that twice; for I would say that, as far as is possible, I embody environmental politics—my roof was the first in the city to harvest sunlight; it fed the rain water tank, despite the then city by-laws to the contrary. And I did, in a recent public lecture (at IIT, Chennai), point out the discrepancy between the representation of the *neytal* landscape of *Cankam* literature and the reality of Marina Beach, here in Chennai. I spoke about how the Nilgiris (the *kurinchi* landscape) had almost rid itself of plastic bags, unlike the glut in the Bay of Bengal. I expressed a hope that local Tamils would follow the Nilgiri example. But I think your question hints at something deeper. For I felt restrained from direct response to some audience-questions because I was sharply aware of cultural differences and the inapplicability of some of the Western eco-concepts. For instance, what use my talking about individual responsibility for water harvesting? What use of other shallow ecology approaches, like growing one's own vegetables? Both questions assume an economy and ecology that has little bearing on the local, where thousands in Chennai eke out an existence on the pavement. And yet the pavement-dwellers are not the heavy energy users; that dishonour belongs to Australians and Americans. Furthermore (and I'll finish soon) in the talk I had broadly laid out ecofeminists' views regarding the relationship between patriarchal language, and how it reflects sexism, naturism, and speciesism; with respect for women, it is argued, respect for nature would follow. It's an idea that's difficult to sustain I'm now thinking. For if we again turn to the local, the cow is worshipped as goddess, the mother supreme; but in the organic world female infanticide and dowry murders are recorded daily in the local newspapers. The inability to answer some questions directly resulted from discomfiture: discomfiture in trying to articulate ecocritical positions that now seemed First-World centric; in experiencing a dissonance between applying *those* knowledge systems to culture and location that were not truly known to me; and not least of all, in wishing not to offend the kindness of my hosts as a result of my ignorance of local cultures. This is why it's so important to have the local ecocritical organizations, such as OSLE-India.

The Study Circle Corner

S. Susan Deborah

The twelfth Study Circle was an additional Study Circle presided by Dr. CA Cranston from ASLE-ANZ (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment-Australia and New Zealand), who was in India for a brief period. The presentation was on the 11th of April, 2008, in the Bishop Heber Hall, Guest room, Madras Christian College. Her talk titled '**Pre-colonial Imaginings; Post-Colonial Footprints**' traced the ecological timeline in Australia and meandered over various aspects of the Australian landscape and civilization. The talk was peppered with visuals and excerpts from poems and prose passages. The presentation, in short, was a historical and environmental journey through