

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-1, FEBRUARY 2025

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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Plant Humanities and Biodiversity: A Textual Exploration and Reclamation in a Posthumanist Perspective

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14980147>

Article History: Submitted-31/01/2025, Revised-09/02/2025, Accepted-22/02/2025, Published-28/02/2025.

Abstract:

The objective of this research paper is to identify and find the intricate working out of the agents of plant humanities in selected literary works. This paper seeks to identify the relationship of human beings with plants, trees, the vegetation and the green environment, in a global perspective. As found in literary works and also in the development of plant humanism intricately worked out in various texts, nature acted as a healing agent. The development of plant humanism has been considered from the sense of environmental responsibility that helps retain its sustainability. The selected literary texts allow the observer to consider and analyze the significance of plant humanism that finds an ever growing environmental consciousness along the line of their own development in general. The selected texts, intensely associated with plant humanism, show a way out for those who have alienated themselves from Nature. This paper also seeks to explore the gradual growth and development in the process of creating the trajectory of plant humanism in the British literary output. A close working out of the selected texts reveal an intrinsic view where all the experiences of the world are found to be, not isolated from the experiences of nature but, to seek a way of human development that includes a posthumanist outlook that can maintain a harmony and uphold a balance of human-nature relationship without which none can

thrive. Only reclamation of the ancient pristine nature can save the earth and the human beings.

Keywords: Plant humanism, biodiversity, environment, anthropocentrism, literary texts.

The relationship between plants and human beings is as old as the origin of human beings itself, in the history of origin of life on the earth. Planthumanism studies also evince the close bonding and dependence of human beings on the plants and trees. Human beings are directly dependent on the plants for oxygen, food and nutrients and even for shelter, as their basic needs for survival and sustenance. Human beings are directly dependent on plants and trees because they cannot survive even for a moment without the natural oxygen that they get from the plants and trees. A large amount of food articles from plants are consumed by human beings. Even the plants and trees provide shelter to the human beings and human beings depend on plants also because of the medicines that they get from the plants and plant parts. Besides, plants and trees also provide aesthetic delight to human beings. Plants and trees are so intricately associated with human beings that they have been found in literary presentations with a close kinship that reflect on human life, society, culture and aesthetic and spiritual life of human beings. A look back into the history of human civilization would definitely trace the dependence of human beings on the plants, trees and the vegetation not only for survival means that they provide but also for religious associations of plants with human beings also. Human beings and plants have been creating an indispensable bond and are continuing to do so since the time of creation of the living beings including human beings. The relationship between plants and humans has been reflected in literature in a close proximity to the extent of all the benefits that plants provide to human beings.

However, the anthropogenic effects on plants have not been so clearly exposed in the literature of the past. It has been only in recent times that the significance of ecocriticism, environmental studies and planthumanities have come to the forefront to resist the detrimental effects of the anthropogenic causes that are showered down on to the green world and the environment. Human beings have been depicted in literature to take the benefits of plants and the green vegetation and consume their gifts only, but very few texts have dealt with the importance of plants and the trees as living and natural entities that deserve dignity of their existence on the planet. This aspect of the planthumanities has been ignored in major texts. Human beings have accepted the bounty of the green plants but never have thought to return something or preserve them except in very recent times. Rachel Yerbury in the article, “Reconceptualizing human-wildlife interaction places and bonds through ecopsychology: Healthy reciprocal relationships” observed, ‘Humans need to alter the path down which we are headed, regarding the natural world and wildlife’(Human-Animal Interactions 3).

John C. Ryan, an eminent writer in the field of Planthumanities has observed that ‘the world’s literary traditions feature a diversity of poems elucidating the spiritual, aesthetic, moral, political and ecological importance of plant life’ (*Plant Perspectives* 259).The plant communities of forests, gardens, and individual plants of special importance have found place in literature and fueled the imaginative sustenance of both the readers and the writers. Anglo-Saxon texts within the British literary output abound in the depiction of the natural environment and the plant communities. Since ancient times plants and trees have been used to denote life, victory, spiritualism, growth and development. In symbolic representations the plant and tree communities have been used for denoting strength, power, resistance, longevity, peacefulness, calmness, interconnectedness among others. In literary works like “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” green girdle has been depicted to be acting like a protective shield to Sir Gawain. The green girdle is made of gold threads and green silk,

hatched from the eggs laid on tree leaves and tree barks. The silk belt, an admixture of the organic and metallic elements in right proportion, was believed to provide an appropriate and apt protection to Sir Gawain. In the Elizabethan age, the wide upsurge of Renaissance humanism strengthened the position of human beings and marginalized the nonhuman entities. Though human beings dominated the centre, the relevance of the plant and tree community occupied some space in the works of Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and other minor writers of the time. Sidney's pastoral romance, "Arcadia". The shepherds and shepherdess find a perfect atmosphere in the green world of Arcadia where the humans mingle with the plants and the singing birds in an infinite interconnectedness of the sense of merrymaking and joyfulness. Arcadia turns into almost a pastoral fantasy.

Use of plant and tree communities abounds in the plays of Shakespeare. In "Macbeth", the approaching Birnam wood towards Dunsinane provides one of the major twisting turns to the tragic play. The approaching soldiers, each holding a branch of a tree in their hands for deceiving the actual number of soldiers in their group, in the hindsight produces the impression of a forest stalking gradually towards the Dunsinane castle from far. The association of human and plant communities, the forest tree and the tree branches used by the approaching soldiers evinces the mechanism of deception in war, where plant communities are made to act in a congenial and friendly manner with the humans in the ancient warfare.

Shakespeare's use of the Forest of Arcadia in "As You Like It", exhibits a close association of human plant communities. The gradual transformations, brought about in the characters are all due to the benevolent effects of the forest woodland of Arden. Orlando hangs love letters on the barks of trees, in praise of Rosalind. Oliver and Duke Frederick, the wicked are transformed as soon as they set for the Forest of Arden. The Forest of Arden seems to cast a spell in all the human beings- wicked or bad and are finally transformed into

noble ones. The human characters make a happy ending of the play and spread an air of freshness of the evergreen romantic forest for all ages to be remembered.

Various myths, legends, landscape features with trees, home decor and even trees of life have been depicted in literature. In Eclogues, plants and the green environment along with the pastures, sheep and shepherds have served as a vital source of materials.

Vegetal bodies are among the many sources in literature that found expression as similes, metaphors, personifications and other literary devices. Man-eating plants, walking plants, hybrid plant-humans have been catering to the taste of contemporary literary genres like- science fictions, fairy tales and terror fictions.

While post-anthropocentrism challenged anthropocentrism and established its place with the focus on ‘species egalitarianism’ (belief in the principle that all species are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities) and ‘monistic vitalism’(belief that the universe is made of life force), and posthumanism replaced humanism, suggesting that it reflects a systematic attempt to challenge humanist assumptions underlying the construction of ‘the human’, the concept of critical posthumanities advocated a fusion of both post-anthropocentrism and posthumanism. Posthuman Condition, on the other hand, brings to light human engagements with the world which are constantly shaped by the confluence of ‘zoe-’(living), ‘geo-’(geological) and techno-based (technological) dimensions. Rosi Braidotti’s framework advocates for ‘species egalitarianism’ that seeks a ‘monistic vitalism’ taking into account all living beings in the form of an interconnectedness through a ‘zoe/ geo/ techno assemblage’ in the post human era. The basic justification for this framework as per Rosi Braidotti’s *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019) is the assertion that all living beings are interconnected and thus it rejects the idea of ‘species supremacy’ and ‘human exceptionalism’.

The fundamental idea behind the ‘posthuman condition’ includes the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” involving the advanced technologies like robotics, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, nanotechnology on one hand and the “Sixth Extinction” involving the extinction of different species due to anthropogenic effects, on the other. The blurring of the boundaries between digital, physical, and biological forces, and the extinction of species and the hazardous climatic conditions together mark the ‘posthuman condition’ in the era of anthropocene. While the first idea involving technological innovation pertains to the systemic accelerations, generated by advanced capitalism at the economic level, the second includes environmental accelerations, associated with climate change at the ecological level. The first and the second modes of accelerations coalesce and collide to enhance the ‘posthuman condition’ in the anthropocene era where humans have turned into geological agents rather than being biological agents of the planet we inhabit.

Evidently, the past decades have been witnessing the rise of the posthuman condition that arose from an entanglement of the socio-cultural and political world order with that of the material and energy cycles of the earth. Locating humans in entanglement with nonhumans have gained prominence in recent times in the hands of Bernard Stiegler, Bruno Latour, Michel Serres, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Donna Haraway and others. The term ‘anthropocene’ is being intensively used as an operative critical tool for questioning and assessing our understanding of the present relation between humans and nonhumans. A return to the atavistic world that existed with its naturalizing tendencies and anti-colonial outlook has been a need of the present world order.

Coined by Ihab Hassan in *Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture?* (1977), the term, ‘Posthumanism’ came to be a concept that criticized humanism’s Eurocentric, rationalistic, anthropocentric and patriarchal assumptions that rejected essentialist views of human nature. Posthumanism examines the relationship between humans

and other life forms, including both animals and plants, and explores the entanglements between humans and nonliving matter. A recently developed multidisciplinary field called plant humanities promotes new perspectives on the botanical world and human-plant relations. Plant humanities blur boundaries against plants, people and ecologies. Plant humanities interrogate multiple issues relating to human-plant interdependence, food security, climate disturbance, loss of biodiversity and even botanical heritage. The complex human-plant relations and interdependence find representation in literatures of varied ages.

The relationship between plants and human beings is as old as the origin of human beings itself, in the history of origin of life on the earth. Planthumanism studies also evince the close bonding and dependence of human beings on the plants and trees. Human beings are directly dependent on the plants for oxygen, food and nutrients and even for shelter, as their basic needs for survival and sustenance. Human beings are directly dependent on plants and trees because they cannot survive even for a moment without the natural oxygen that they get from the plants and trees. A large amount of food articles from plants are consumed by human beings. Even the plants and trees provide shelter to the human beings and human beings depend on plants also because of the medicines that they get from the plants and plant parts. Besides, plants and trees also provide aesthetic delight to human beings. Plants and trees are so intricately associated with human beings that they have been found in literary presentations with a close kinship that reflect on human life, society, culture and aesthetic and spiritual life of human beings.

A look back into the history of human civilization would definitely trace the dependence of human beings on the plants, trees and the vegetation not only for survival means that they provide but also for religious associations of plants with human beings. Human beings and plants have been creating an indispensable bond and are continuing to do so since the time of creation of the living beings including human beings. The relationship

between plants and humans has been reflected in literature in a close proximity to the extent where all the benefits that plants provide to human beings support a collaborative survival with different planetary cohabitants in this rich biodiverse world.

However, the anthropogenic effects on plants have not been so clearly exposed in the literature of the past. It has been only in recent times that the significance of ecocriticism, environmental studies and planthumanities has come to the forefront to resist the detrimental effects of the anthropogenic causes that are showered down on to the green world and the environment. Human beings have been depicted in literature to take the benefits of plants and the green vegetation and consume their gifts only, but very few texts have dealt with the importance of plants and the trees as living and natural entities that deserve dignity of their existence on the planet. This aspect of the plant humanities has been ignored in major texts. Human beings have accepted the bounty of the green plants but never have thought to return something or preserve them except in very recent times.

The plant communities of forests, gardens, and individual plants of special importance have found place in literature and fueled the imaginative sustenance of both the readers and the writers. Anglo-Saxon texts within the British literary output abound in the depiction of the natural environment and the plant communities. Since ancient times, plants and trees have been used to denote life, victory, spiritualism, growth and development. In symbolic representations the plant and tree communities have been used for denoting strength, power, resistance, longevity, peacefulness, calmness, interconnectedness among others. In literary works like “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” green girdle has been depicted to be acting like a protective shield to Sir Gawain. The green girdle is made of gold threads and green silk, hatched from the eggs laid on tree leaves and tree barks. The silk belt, an admixture of the organic and metallic elements in right proportion, was believed to provide an appropriate and apt protection to Sir Gawain. In the Elizabethan age, the wide upsurge of Renaissance

humanism strengthened the position of human beings and marginalized the nonhuman entities. Though human beings dominated the centre, the relevance of the plant and tree community occupied some space in the works of Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and other minor writers of the time. In Sidney's pastoral romance, "Arcadia", the shepherds and shepherdesses find a perfect atmosphere in the green world of Arcadia where the humans mingle with the plants and the singing birds in an infinite interconnectedness in the sense of merrymaking and joyfulness. Arcadia turns into almost a pastoral fantasy.

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An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (collected in the theoretical work *The Ecocriticism Reader*) (1996) that, “the conceptual and practical problem is to find the ground upon which the two communities – the human, the natural-can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere” (107).

Various myths, legends, landscape features with trees, home decor and even trees of life have been depicted in literature. In “Eclogues”, plants and the green environment along with the pastures, sheep and shepherds have served as a vital source of materials. Vegetal bodies are among the many sources in literature that found expression as similes, metaphors, personifications and other literary devices.

Man-eating plants, walking plants, hybrid plant-humans have been catering to the taste of contemporary literary genres like- science fictions, fairy tales and terror fictions. Pat Murphy’s short story, “His Vegetable Wife” (1986), Ronald Fraser’s “Flower Phantoms” (1926), John Boyd’s “The Pollinators of Eden” (1969) are a few interesting literary works on plants humanities, falling close to the genre of Science fiction.

Plant humanities have observed the co-evolution of humans and nonhumans with respect to social relations and environmental justice. Dipesh Chakrabarty in “The Seventh History and Theory Lecture: Anthropocene Time” (2018) asserts, “the term Anthropocene helped focus public attention on the possibility that human beings now so dominated the planet that their collective impact was comparable to those of very large-scale planetary forces” (7). Val Plumwood (1939- 2008) observes, “We need to understand and affirm both otherness and our community in the earth” (qtd. in Garrard 29). The posthumanist methodology employed in the theoretical concept of plant humanities thus focuses on the so far neglected and unappreciated elements, relationships and interdependence on the non-human subjects called plants in the Anthropocene.

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