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## Relocating 'The Green Shade': An Eco-Critical Analysis of Marvell's *The Garden*

Pintu Karak

The University of Burdwan,  
Burdwan

### Abstract:

Marvell's *The Garden* is one of the brilliant specimens of the genre called nature poetry. The poem can be analysed from the study of nature-writing or what is usually known as Eco-criticism. Eco-critics are concerned with the representation of the natural world in a literary text. Eco-critics are also called environmentalists. An Eco-critical reading of a literary text inquires into the different ways in which humans and the nature interact and influence each other. There are different groups of eco-criticism like Marxist Environmentalism, Eco-feminism etc. If the concern of the eco-critics is to deify nature, Marvell's poem follows the line in that it extols the serenity and bounty of nature. The poet is in favour of contemplative life to din and bustle of men. The poet is astonished to witness the arrogant attitude of men who do not know that their hard struggle is of little importance when compared with Nature's peaceful and quiet work. In Marvell's *The Garden* the identification or union with nature is neither full-fledged nor simple. Further, the garden is a place for refreshment and nourishment. In the process of exploiting women, nature is finally exploited by men. Actually, the word 'green' is a pet word for Marvell. The word is surcharged with rejuvenating and renovating power. The poet means to say that in comparison with a green thought this material world is of no importance. The word 'green' stands for innocence, solitude, vivacity, recreation etc. In the poem Eve is shown as offering wrong beauty and wrong love. The Eco-feminists cannot but protest against the portrayal of Eve in derogatory terms as being responsible for the suffering of Adam. Thus throughout the poem the poet idolizes and venerates 'the happy garden state'. Men cannot live without the beauty of nature. The quietness of Nature gives the poet a sense of self-contemplation and self-satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Nature-writing, Eco-criticism, Environmentalism, Eco-feminism, green, garden

The poet who marvelled the readers and critics alike in the last decade of the nineteenth century through his exquisite handling of subject matter and stylistic devices is obviously Andrew Marvell(1621-1678).Originally associated with the school of Donne ,that is , the metaphysical school of poetry which focused on abstruse terminology, dramatic beginning, ratiocinative mode, colloquial language, wit, pun, paradox, ambiguity and above all, the use of metaphysical conceit; his is a veritable mosaic where he deals with varied and variegated themes. His poems like *To His Coy Mistress*, *The Coronet*, *Mourning*, *Last Instructions to a Painter*, *The Fair Singer*, *The Picture of Little T.C*, *The Definition of Love*, *The Garden*, *The Mower's Song*, *An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland*, *On a Drop of Dew*, *Upon Appleton House*, *to My Lord Fairfax* are unique in matter as well as manner, theme as well as treatment, content as well as style. In his poems, Marvell treated political, carpe-diem, personal, religious and pastoral themes. His *The Garden* is obviously the finest poem of the 'poems of rural solitude' (Joseph H. Summers, *Introduction to Andrew Marvell*, pp.13-14)

*The Garden* is one of the supreme specimens of the genre called nature poetry or pastoral poetry. As Rosalie L. Colie comments in “*My Echoing Song*”: *Andrew Marvell’s Poetry of Criticism*:

“The Garden” itself brings to its height the tradition of Renaissance garden poetry, at the same time refining and exploiting many other traditions not primarily associated with gardens....| (p.14)

It is significant to note that garden theme is one of the recurring and preponderant themes in Marvell’s poetry. In different poems like *The Nymph Complaining*, *Little T.C*, *Upon Appleton House* Marvell represents different gardens in different ways. Whereas in *The Nymph Complaining* the beautiful garden is created to satisfy the demands of the creator—the heroine, in *Upon Appleton House* the garden assumes a paradisiacal stature with its pristine naiveté.

Marvell’s poem *The Garden* is, as discussed earlier, one of the most sublime yet complicated nature poems. The poem can be analysed from the study of nature -writing or what is commonly known as ecocriticism. As Cheryl Glotfelty notes, Ecocriticism is ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ (*The Ecocriticism Reader*, xix). The term was first used by the US critic William Rueckert in an essay ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism’. The terms ‘eco-criticism’ and ‘green studies’ are the two sides of the same coin used respectively by the USA and UK. The eco-critics are concerned with the representation of the natural world in a literary text. Their sole target is to save nature from the curses of industrialization, pollution and mascal demolition of environment. Hence they are also called environmentalists. There are different groups of eco-criticism like Marxist Environmentalism, Eco-feminism etc.

To foreground nature as the dominating force of their subject matter is the theme of the eco-critics. In Marvell’s *The Garden* sensual pleasure has given way to meditation and contemplation. The theme of the poem is repose and recreation, contemplation and calmness. The opening stanza of the poem extols the quietness of nature. The poet prefers contemplative life to din and bustle of men:

HOW vainly men themselves amaze

To win the palm, the oak, or bays,

And their incessant labours see

Crowned from some single herb or tree,

Here Marvell chides the materialistic attitude of men who crave for fame, glory and honour in their lives. They labour hard to attain the palm, the oak and the bays which respectively stand for military, civil and poetic achievement. The use of the word ‘amaze’ is noteworthy. It means perplex or astonish. The poet is astonished to witness the arrogant attitude of men who do not know that their hard struggle is of little importance when compared with Nature’s peaceful and quiet work. In this connection one can note that Marvell’s presentation of nature is not terrible. It is rather a peaceful nature which brilliantly exposes the hollowness of men.

Thus men's 'toils' or labours are wisely upbraided or rebuked by the very garland which they desired so much. All the flowers and trees unite together to weave the garland of tranquillity and rest.

The poet's search for quietude and beatitude, innocence and comfort is to be found only in the balmy lap of nature. Earlier the poet ransacked frantically to find them in the outside world, among the 'busy companies of men' but his effort was doomed to fail. The 'delicious solitude' of the green garden is all the more pleasing to the poet and he cannot but make contrast between man-made society and God made green nature:

Society is all but rude

To this delicious solitude

Thus the garden is both a mirror for and a mirror of the outside world.

"The garden is a rich emblem... The gardens to which Marvell most directly alludes in his poem are the Garden of Eden, the Earthly Paradise, and that Garden to which both Stoic and Epicurean, as well as Platonist, retire for solace or meditation ", declares Frank Kermode in "The Argument of Marvell's 'Garden'" (quoted in Michael Wilding, P. 129). It is a rich symbol which reminds one of the symbolic gardens of the Middle Ages. The poet further prioritizes the greenness of the leaves and the plants over the whiteness and redness of the women. The beauties of the gardens are far more attractive than the dazzling beauties of the ladies. The poet is shocked to see the cruel effort of the cruel and foolish lovers who carve the names of their beloved with knives on the barks of the trees with a view to immortalizing their names without realizing that real beauty lies elsewhere.

Whereas in *Upon the Hill and Grove at Bill-borow*, Fairfax is at one with nature, in Marvell's *The Garden* the identification or union with nature is neither full-fledged nor simple. The poet mentions how the restless passion for love achieves its solemnity and sublimity amidst the beautiful herbs and trees. This garden is a place for refreshment and nourishment. It is a resort of pleasure for the inward tickling and delight of the senses. It is an abode of meditation, retreat and rest. The poet alludes to the classical Gods like Apollo and Pan who ran after mortal beauties like Daphne and Syrinx who ultimately escaped their clutches by turning into a laurel and a reed respectively. Thus in the process of exploiting the women, nature is finally exploited by men. Nature is here equated with women. Both – Nature and women- reproduce and nurture human beings. The oppression of both women and nature are the basic agenda of the eco-feminists who are of the view that nature vis-a-vis women are exploited by the patriarchal society.

If Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey* finds comfort in the bosom of Nature and if Keats wants to enjoy the 'green' countryside in his poem *To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent* Marvell too wants to drink the sap of nature to the last degree. In the fifth stanza the poet finds physical recreation, solitude and bodily ecstasy. The poet leads a 'wondrous life' as apples drop on his head, vine crush their wine on his mouth, the nectarines, the inquisitive peach themselves reach the poet's hand. He stumbles on the melons and is ensnared with flowers:

Stumbling on melons, as I pass

Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass.

These highly sensuous lines remind one of Keats in *Ode to Autumn*:

To bend with apples the mossed cottage trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel...

Rosalie L. Colie notes 'Stanza five reports a genuinely climactic experience, culminating in a loss of will in the poet, the plant's beloved and in his fall. Even if the poet falls, his 'fall' is on grass and therefore it is a comfortable and soothing one unlike the 'Fall' of Adam and Eve mentioned in the Bible.'

The poet's mind now withdraws from the inferior pleasures of worldly life. Far from the madding crowd, the poet has now become one with his nature. The poet embarks on the creative faculty of men – that sublime imagination – which 'transcends' everything it perceives. The mind is like an ocean which contains within itself a vast number of things unseen and unknown. But the mind not only reproduces but also creates; rather it recreates. The mind can annihilate or destroy all that is made; it can reduce everything to a non-entity:

Annihilating all that's made  
To a green thought in a green shade.

The word 'green' is a favourite word to Marvell. It is a pet word for him. In different poems it is connected with grass, buds and even children. It is a rejuvenating and renovating power. The poet means to say that in comparison with a green thought this material world is of no importance, of no value. The thought is green because Solitude is green. A perceptive reader can easily note that 'green' is colour of freshness, vitality, energy, vivacity, recreation and retirement. It also stands for innocence and solitude. The poet now anchors on intellectual recreation. His mind now moves from physical pleasure to extreme metaphysical delight. The phrase 'all that's made' comes from Virgil's seventh *Eclogue*. The most crucial statement of the poem as per William Empson, signifies:

Either "reducing the whole material world to nothing material, i.e. to a green thought", or "considering the material world as of no value compared to a green thought", either contemplating everything or shutting everything out [*Literary Criticism: A Reading*, p.294]

"In this garden intellect and character are so cultivated, so rarefied, that the spiritual garden, the real garden, the garden of the world can all be identified with the garden of the mind", declares Rosalie L. Colie in *My Echoing Song: Andrew Marvell's Poetry of Criticism* (p.170). The poet now uses philosophical language. The poem takes on a spiritual message when the poet envisages the journey of the Soul thereby rejecting the outer garment of the body and coming stealthily into the branches of the trees. Joan Bennett opines in *Five Metaphysical Poets*:

These two stanzas, vi and vii are the climax of the poem to which all that precedes them leads. We are to reject fame, courtly love and all that men seek in 'busie Companies of Men', because it is in the solitude and peace of the garden, that the soul can best prepare itself for heaven. It is the climax, but it is not the end of Marvell's poem.

The poet remembers 'that happy garden state', the bliss of solitude in the Garden of Eden. Adam, the first created man walked happily and peacefully in the celestial garden until Eve came, deprived Adam of solitude and looted the tranquillity in Adam's mind. The eco-feminists cannot but protest against the portrayal of Eve in derogatory terms as being responsible for the suffering of Adam. Here the mother of mankind – Eve – is shown as offering wrong beauty and wrong love.

The last stanza provides a shift from the garden to the gardener. The poet mentions the sublime artistry of the 'skilful gardener' who planted the flowers and herbs in such a way as to form a sun-dial. The poet very majestically avers the harmonious existence of the natural world:

How could such sweet and whole some hours

Be reckoned but with herbs and flow'rs!

Thus the impeccability of the garden is vehemently asserted by the poet who is an ardent admirer of nature.

Thus throughout the poem the poet idolizes and venerates 'the happy garden state'. The eco-critics are concerned with the worship of nature and the celebration of the purest ecstasy that is to be found only in the book of nature. According to them, it is nature which shapes man's lives. Men cannot live without the beauty and bounty of the 'green' world. Eco-critics are also concerned with the bad impact of the environmental annihilation and pollution. In Marvell's poem nature is a boon, a blessing, a consecration. The quietness of nature gives the poet a sense of self contemplation, self-satisfaction and self-knowledge. It is a means of gratification and contentment. The garden, with its opulence, affluence and abundance is a haven of heaven, a paradise of perfect candour and immaculacy as opposed to the rudeness, crudeness and shrewdness of society. Here nature soothes the poet's seething heart, endows him with charismatic powers and decorates him with magical charms.

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