

NATURE IN IRIS MURDOCH'S THE SEA, THE SEA

G.M. Adhyanggono¹

Abstract: Iris Murdoch's The Sea, The Sea is a novel which uses nature as its background or setting. This article particularly intends to give its attention to the aspects of nature delineated in the novel. In other words, this study is aimed at identifying, classifying, and describing aspects or elements of nature in it. It is also important to describe the relationship between these aspects and the story, as well as the characters. In addition, the tenets of "ecocriticism" are used as the parameter to prove that the novel is still "anthropocentric", or a human-centred work of art. The reason why such a method is used is simply because it is concerned with nature. Nevertheless, the study in this case can not be seen as a "pure" ecological reading because it merely uses ecological boundaries to prove the anthropocentricity of the novel. However, since some principles in the ecocriticism are used, it is inevitable not to mention or explain what this ecocriticism deals with.

Key words: ecocriticism, anthropocentric

INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism or green study is defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment"(Barry

¹ G.M. Adhyanggono, S.S., M.A. <adhyanggono@yahoo.com> +6281228029666 is a lecturer at the Faculty of Letters, Soegijapranata Catholic University.

2002:248). In USA it is popular as ecocriticism whereas in the UK, “green study”, but basically there is no clear cut between the two. Throughout this article the term ecocriticism is used. Barry (2002) mentions that there are at least three basic tenets or beliefs in this approach. Firstly, it is said that ecocriticism rejects the notion that everything is socially and / or linguistically constructed. In other words, it repudiates the idea that everything is or can be textualised as a product of a certain culture. Secondly, ecocriticism believes that nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves. Further, it is said that nature does exist as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. Thirdly, it is said that nature is not reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice (as we might conceive a deity, for instance, and project it out onto the universe). Yet, the fact that ecocriticism does not have a widely-known set of assumptions, doctrines, or procedures as other more traditional approaches will not be the reason for not using it in this article.

Methodologically, what needs to be made clear in this study is, in the first place, to identify the elements of nature used in the novel. Traditionally speaking, ecocriticism or ecological approach may speak of the Four Elements, namely earth, air, water and fire. Although for many scholars, the four elements sound so ancient, but it is also still a contemporary way of thinking about the material world. And ecocriticism itself is a critical method that both evokes the responsibility of the critic and reinstates referentiality as one of the crucial and primary activities of literature (Murphy 2009:1). This article tend to make use of “four areas” categorised by Barry (2002) as follows:

Area one: 'the wilderness' (e.g. deserts, oceans, uninhabited continents, etc.)

Area two: 'the scenic sublime' (e.g. forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfalls, etc.)

Area three: 'the countryside' (e.g. hills, fields, woods, etc.)

Area four: 'the domestic picturesque' (e.g. parks, gardens, lanes, etc.)

These four areas may be slightly overlapping to include some other natural elements, such as rain, mist or sunlight presented in the novel. Yet, the consideration in applying the four areas is twofold. Firstly, it is based on those which are purely of nature, and secondly, on those which are to some degree influenced by human interference, or part of the culture. The next step is to relate the descriptions of nature in the novel to the issue such as balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable use of energy and resources. The final step is by providing an assessment that derives from collective ethical responsibility, and the claim of the importance of the world beyond us.

ANALYSIS

In identifying the elements of nature, what can be observed in *The Sea, The Sea* is that various natural elements are represented. They are, for instance, wind, mist, sunlight, the sea, the hill, the woods, rock, the garden, flowers, trees, rain, storm, the moon, stones, the bay, stars, cloud, and the sky. Considering the various number of the elements, it is necessary to focus on those which are closely related to the major setting of the story. It is around Shruff End and the nearby areas, where Charles Arrowby lives in 'exile'. The use of nature is firstly depicted in the *Prehistory*:

The sea which lies beyond me as I write glows rather than sparkles in the bland May sunshine. With the tide turning, it leans quietly against the land, almost unflecked by ripples or foam. Near to the horizon it is a luxurious purple, spotted with regular lines of emerald green. At the horizon it is indigo. Near to the shore, where my view is framed by rising heaps of humpy

yellow rock, there is a band of lighter green, icy and pure, less radiant, opaque however, not transparent. We are in the north, and the bright sunshine cannot penetrate the sea. Where the gentle water taps the rock there is still a surface skin of colour. The cloudless sky is very pale at the indigo horizon which it lightly pencils in with silver. Its blue gains towards the zenith and vibrates there. But the sky looks cold, even the sun looks cold (Murdoch 1999:1).

This description uses the elements of nature such as sea, sunshine, land, horizon, shore, rock, and sky. When they are categorised based on the four areas, then they primarily fit those of area one: sea, sunshine, sky, horizon, and area two: land, shore, rock. Accordingly, the categories of wilderness and scenic sublime are used in this case. Yet, the description seems to be inevitably human-centred for it conveys how Charles Arrowby depicts the scene before him emotionally. There are lots of words indicating the emotional involvement of the character, such as “quietly”, “icy”, “pale”, and “cold”. The implication is that the reader gets a particular description of nature from the point of view of Charles, who is already mentally judging. To some degree this also implies positive and negative senses. Thus, everything is emotionally perceived. The relationship between Charles and nature in this case is merely based on the necessity to imply what the character feels.

In Prehistory, it can also be identified how nature becomes the 'target' of the character, Charles. Whether or not it is made as a supporting description of his exile, or is meant to arouse associations, the reader is shown by the fact that nature is represented on that purpose:

I have considered writing a journal, not of happenings for there will be none, but as a record of mingled thoughts and daily observations: 'my philosophy', my pensees against a

background of simple descriptions of the weather and other natural phenomena. This now seems to me to be a good idea. The sea. I could fill a volume simply with my word-pictures of it. I would certainly like to write some sustained account of my surroundings, its flora and fauna. This could be of some interest, if I preserved, even though I am no White of Selborne. From my sea-facing window at this moment I can see three different kinds of gulls, swallows, a cormorant, innumerable butterflies drifting about over the flowers which grow miraculously upon my yellow rock...

I must make no attempt at 'fine writing' however, that would be too spoil my enterprise. Besides, I should merely make a fool of myself.

Oh blessed northern sea, a real sea with clean merciful tides, not like the stinking soupy Mediterranean!

They say there are seals here, but I have seen none yet (Murdoch 1999:2).

From this description, there seems to be only one obvious ecological reference, namely, the sea which is in area two, in addition to some living animals and flowers. What makes this description interesting or worth-picking out is the attitude of Charles towards nature. There is an explicit statement of the fear of making 'fine writing'. It implies that what Charles thinks of fine writing is always something to do with describing nature romantically or in an excessive way. His very reason for not doing so rests in two arguments. Firstly, it will 'spoil' his purpose, and secondly it will make him look like 'a fool'. Moreover, Charles really sets up an image of two locations, the Northern Sea and the Mediterranean, which he composes. Hence, it can be concluded that what Charles does is to underestimate nature.

The way Charles describes his surrounding Shruff End is also interesting as indicated below:

This rocky coast attracts, thank God, no trippers with their 'kiddies'. There is not a vestige of beastly sand anywhere. I have heard it called an ugly coast. Long may it be deemed so. The rocks, which stretch away in both directions, are not in fact picturesque. They are sandy yellow in colour, covered with crystalline flecks, and are folded into large ungainly incoherent heaps. Below the tide line they are festooned with growths of glistening blistery dark brown seaweed which has a rather unpleasant smell. Up above however, and at close quarters, they afford the clamberer a surprising number of secret joys. There are many V-shaped ravines containing small pools or screes of extremely varied and pretty stones. There are also flowers which contrive somehow to root themselves in crannies: pink thrift and mauve mallow, a sort of white spreading sea campion, a blue green plant with cabbage-like leaves, and a tiny saxifrage thing with leaves and flowers so small as almost to defeat the naked eye.

A feature of the coastline is that here and there the water has worn the rocks into holes, which I would not dignify with the names of caves, but which from the swimmer eye-view; present a striking and slightly sinister appearance. At one point, near to my house, the sea has actually composed an arched bridge of rock under which it roars into a deep open steep-sided enclosure beyond. I afford me a curious pleasure to stand upon this bridge and watch the violence forces which the churning waves, advancing or retreating, generate within the confined space of the rocky hole (Murdoch 1999:5).

Apparently, this indicates that his depiction of the physical environment is based on 'facts' of the surroundings of Shruff End. Yet, what Charles does is to repeat what he also did in the previous case.

He allows his surroundings to be merely the 'target' of his eyes without intending to draw conclusions but just taking in what he sees.

In the following part, there is likely to be a shift from merely seeing the physical environment as the object of the eyes and the medium to enact his physical activities into paying attention to deal with nature:

Unfortunately the lower part of the banister is broken away, and the rock face being smooth, the slippery steps are useless, except at high tide, if there is any strong swell. The waves simply pluck one off. It is remarkable how quietly firmly powerful my sportive sea can be! But the idea is clearly excellent. I must have the banister extended; and it occurs to me that a few iron stanchions, let into the face of my 'cliff', would provide quite enough hand and foot holds for the climb, in any state of the tide. I must enquire in the village about workmen (Murdoch 1999:6).

In this passage, Charles performs the tendency to interfere with nature by putting or extending iron stanchions. There are two arguments for that. Firstly, the tower, the steps and the banister have already been present there for long time; and secondly, they are man-made. Thus, based on these two considerations, the question that can be brought up is why Charles cannot do the same thing as those people in the past that made those things. Ecocriticism answers this question based on "the idea of responsibilities towards the eco-system" (Soper 1998:2). Whatever has been there, in that coast, whether man-made or nature-given, in that span of time has already created a habitat for an ecosystem. Despite the argument that the establishment of the tower has already disturbed the earlier ecosystem, the remains of the tower in Shruff End has ecologically created a habitat for both organic and non-organic lives. Thus, what Charles intends to do can be considered a threat to the ecosystem there though, as the story goes, he merely uses a rope to climb down instead of the iron stanchions.

Another example of Charles's interference of the ecosystem can also be pinpointed when he collects some stones for his 'lawn'. He does it as he thinks that the stones are pretty. Unlike the previous case in which the iron stanchions are meant to enable him climb down and up the cliff whenever he wants to go swimming, he simply bases his interference of nature on the fact that he admires the objects. In that case, his emotional reason is justified by picking up the stones from their ecosystem where presumably nature has put them. Thus, these two incidents of interference indicate that the novel to certain degree sets up an image of imbalance in the relationship between humans and nature. The human being as represented by Charles takes advantages of nature for his own sake.

Yet, there are some incidents that can be considered as indicators where Charles and his surroundings come to a positive relationship. One of them is described below:

From the back door, which is the door of the kitchen, one emerges onto the little rock-surrounded 'lawn' of cactus-grass and thyme. This I shall leave to nature. I am in any case no gardener. (This is the first land which I have ever owned.) Nature, I note, has here provided me with a rocky seat, upon which I put cushions, and a rocky trough beside it, into which I put the pretty stones which I am collecting; so that one can sit upon the seat and examine the stones (Murdoch 1999:11).

This is a moment when for the first time recognition of the natural process is revealed. The description shows how Charles behaves in relation to nature. He decides not to meddle with nature and to let nature have its way. It can be observed that his attitude is very anthropocentric because his arguments always start with "I" who may reflect certain indifference. Nevertheless, to the very least it indicates that further ecological interference will not happen. Up to this point, there is still no real mutual relationship between Charles and nature.

As the noted goes on, there is an incident indicating how this positive relationship develops from merely an indifference to showing a will of responsibility. This change in attitude of Charles is depicted in the following quotation:

Below the causeway, on either side, there is a wilderness of small rocks, piled higgledy-piggledy by nature, and not accessible to the sea. This is a less attractive scene and not without a few rusty tins and broken bottles which I must one day climb down and remove (Murdoch 1999:11).

When it is said that this indicates a will of responsibility towards mutuality, or say, environmental awareness, this is based on the fact that till the end of the novel such an indication is never explicitly nor implicitly depicted. But at least, this part indicates that he has awareness, a concern of environmental cleanliness though it derives from his anthropocentric reason for being a “less attractive scene”.

With regard to the concepts of the energy and the sustainability of natural resources, the novel does not explicitly employ them very much. The novel tells the reader that Shruff Ends has no electricity. At first it gives the impression that Charles wants to live naturally, without it. Yet, when the use of “driftwood, paraffin, and calor gas” is introduced for cooking and heating as a substitute for the electricity, energy is here presented as a cultural product. It is in the interest of a human being to fulfil his necessities. Of nature, energies such as sea, wind, sunlight, and rain are often presented but they are merely depicted to affirm the feelings or the emotional situation of the characters. They are abundant but they are not meant to be used inherently in the plot.

What can be deduced from the novel is that it is still very anthropocentric. Though it may not be initially and intentionally

meant to focus on nature, the description of nature seems so intriguing. Based on the four areas noted earlier, it can be said that the natural descriptions of the novel are primarily set in area one and two: wilderness and the scenic sublime. The title, *The Sea, The Sea* poses the question of whether or not it denotes something. It may be symbolical. If so, then it seems that the novel is written on the basis of the old philosophy stating that “Nature is to be conceived as Object” (Murdoch 1999:43). This particular philosophy was rooted in the western philosophy from the time of Descartes onwards. Consequently, it has almost become the psyche of people whenever the word 'nature' is brought up.

Relating to the idea of nature above, it does need to be understood that an ecocentered perspective implies a representation or a reading of nature as a factual reality, which requires a sound knowledge of the natural environment. Ursula K. Heise (1997 as cited in Gersdorf and Mayer 2006:72) is only one of several ecocritics who argues for an interdisciplinary approach with a strong emphasis on the natural sciences: “Due to its epistemological power as well as its pervasive cultural influence in the West and, increasingly, in other parts of the world, the scientific description of nature, I would argue, should be one of the cornerstones of ecocriticism”. Among ecocritics special attention is being paid to the scientific discourse of ecology because it studies living organisms as an interdependent whole. However, the application of ecological insights to the social realm or to literary criteria is not without problems. These insights have been (mis)used for moral and philosophical lessons to support ideas of holism, unity, or balance, based on the notion of a “climax community” articulated by the ecologist Frederic Clements at the beginning of the 20th century: “The Clementsian landscape is a balance of nature, a steady-state condition maintained so long as every species remains in place. Everything is cooperatively and interdependently linked; if one element is disturbed, the whole will be

changed” (Barbour 1995:235). But since the 1950s the unpredictability within ecosystems has been stressed so that terms such as “predictability, uniformity, cooperation, stability, and certainty” have become much less *Nature “out there” and as “a social player”* useful than “individualism, competition, a blur of continuous change, and probability” (Barbour 1995:238).

Despite their claim for objectivity and their reliance on facts, scientific discourse in general and ecological discourse in particular are themselves socially and historically constructed. Their application to the cultural realm must always take the specific situatedness of their insights into consideration. The revaluation of the material world has revealed a split among literary ecocritics. Some argue for a conventional, sometimes even naïve literary realism, whereas others support poststructuralist conceptions of nature as a text. The advocates of the first group refer to themselves as “compoststructuralists” to emphasize their aversion to theory and their “earthiness” (Winkler 1996, as cited in Gersdorf and Mayer 2006:73). Glen Love, for example, laments that poststructuralism has emptied out “the rich world of experience within reality,” that “in its place we have been given a thin and hectic play of selfreflexive linguistic functions” (1999:565). Jay Parini has observed “a dismissal of theory’s more solipsistic tendencies,” and a “reengagement with realism, with the actual universe of rocks, trees, and rivers that lie behind the wilderness of signs” (Parini 1995 as cited in Gersdorf and Mayer 2006:73). To reconcile the “compoststructuralists” with the poststructuralists, other ecocritics try to show the differences as well as the similarities between the two positions to come to a more differentiated conclusion: both, they say, question traditional authorities, patriarchal, logocentric and technocratic structures; both opt for a debunking of traditional hierarchies and a revaluation of the marginal; both reject notions of absolute objectivity because perceptions are always subjective or situated. This proves that all

ecocritics deplore the anthropocentric privileging of the human species (Volpp in Gersdorf and Mayer 2006:73)

CONCLUSION

The question that remains now is to what extent the novel calls for the idea of communal and ethical responsibility towards nature. Based on the description of nature in the novel, one can say that Charles should not have considered reinstating the iron stanchions, or he should not have picked up the stones from their natural habitat. Others might argue that such an attempt sounds absurd because it will change the tone, the atmosphere, or even the whole course of the story. Yet, that is the point. The fear of being deconstructed will always prevent other external ideas or issues from meddling with the story. This impossibility is then justified by saying that it is out of the impressionistic reason. In short, this novel does not seem to give further possibility of being assessed by such issues. What should be underlined in *The Sea*, *The Sea* is that all descriptions of nature including the settings of place, are merely used in conjunction with the development of characterisation and plot. It is true that there are some pieces of evidence indicating the awareness of nature and the like. Yet, they are insignificant because they are merely 'there' as a complement to the whole human-centred business in the novel. It is typically the very feature of an anthropocentric work of art which is easily seen as "fine", or "supposed to be" or "Gosh, It's work of art after all!"

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