

SAID MENTAK¹

Timothy Clark

THE VALUE OF ECOCRITICISM

Cambridge University Press, 2019.

With *The Value of Ecocriticism*, Timothy Clark could be said to have successfully moved forward towards a new conception of ecocriticism, or rather, of postcolonial ecocriticism. This builds on his survey of environmental criticism in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011) and his insight into ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015). After ecocriticism has been de-westernized, as Clark informs us, it has been globally extended to all parts of the world, including those formerly colonized countries. The value of ecocriticism here lies in its multiplicity and hence flexibility to incorporate all cultures. Concomitant with this, Clark argues, is the appearance of postcolonial ecocriticism. However, the postcolonial and the global might converge to articulate the same meaning since “the rise of debate on a global ‘Anthropocene’ must now render all ecocriticism ‘postcolonial’ in a broad sense, as the economic systems and lifestyle of any ‘developed’ country necessarily impinge on the material context of all other parts of the world.”²

It is worth noting that Clark has reached the above conclusion after discussing the various challenges that ecocriticism faces. The first challenge, and the most serious one, is the Anthropocene, which—with its irreversibly global space-time scales, its plurality, and ambiguity—pushes contemporary ecocriticism and aesthetic forms towards reconsideration of multiplicity and complexity in the process of inventiveness by adapting to internationalization. The second challenge manifests in texts with local reference and more generally with an exclusive focus on the local. The

¹ Dr Said Mentak is Professor of English at Mohammed I University in Oujda, Morocco, contributing to the MA program in Green Cultural Studies.

² Clark, 137–38.

Anthropocene has imposed the problem of scale which questions the validity of a local issue or situation while changes happen at unperceivable scales: “Changes are happening at scales that we do not perceive with ordinary human faculties.”³ Therefore, how could ecocriticism remain local and yet convincing in its perspectives?

Although Clark reckons that such overwhelming changes go beyond the scope of aesthetic forms, it is the poetic practice, rather than the novel, that is qualified to represent disjunction and unconformities generated by the Anthropocene. The reason, Clark states, is that the Western novel in particular gives primary importance to individual experience, which is by definition more local, whereas contemporary environmental issues tend to be more global. If this is the case, why does he privilege by the end of the book what he calls the global genre of the novel? It is because it is “often practiced as a hybrid mode of writing in which originally Western forces of modernization interact with more local forms of cultural adaptations or resistance.”⁴ Clearly, just as ecocriticism has transgressed Western borders, so have the novels and poems—such as Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, Brathwaite’s poems and Habila’s *Oil on Water*—which have been adapted by other cultures to resist Western values and generate hybridity. It is the postcolonial novel that has by implication developed into a global genre in the same way in which postcolonial ecocriticism has altered into ‘Anthropocene ecocriticism,’ that is “more open to irresolution, the imponderable and the contingencies of scale.”⁵

Although the early chapters of the book seem to be an assemblage of different essays that tackle, on the one hand, the problem of literary inventiveness in the face of the Anthropocene and, on the other, the adaptability of ‘traditional’ ecocriticism to contemporary environmental changes, Clark’s discussion of ‘scalar literacy’ renders the knowledge of scale and contingencies a necessary requirement for an up-to-date global ecocriticism. Scalar literacy for environmental activists is usually corroborated by the famous slogan, “Think globally, act locally,” in the sense that these activists are aware that any local damage to biodiversity entails damage to the whole planet. For Clark, this scalar conception of the local is not only spatial but temporal as well, since the Anthropocene refers to deep time.⁶ Many other scholars, such as Ursula Heise, Derek Woods, Timothy Morton, David Wood, and Mark McGurl,⁷ have discussed this issue, but what distinguishes Clark is his focus on ‘scale’ as a technical term that can be applied in ecocriticism alongside his attempt to coin expressions relating to scale framing. However, in relation to literature and art, ecocritics should rather consider *scalar translation*, which can also be a type of scalar literacy that attempts “to

³ Clark, 80.

⁴ Clark, 137.

⁵ Clark, 155.

⁶ Clark, 41.

⁷ See Timothy Clark, “Scale as a Force of Deconstruction,” in *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Matthias Fritsch et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 81–97.

transpose into a representation on the human scale events and processes that exceed or escape the usual geographical and temporal limits of how we think, or feel involved.”⁸ This is, therefore, a call to ecocritics to newly conceive of literary texts, for instance, as “freeze-frame” versions of a larger temporal scale.

Clark’s effort can be understood as a reconsideration of ecocriticism to make it a more inclusive approach that takes into account the rapidly changing attitudes towards the local and the global, either at the level of environmental activism or literary and artistic representation. For Clark, ecocritics should aim to think in terms of an Anthropocene critique based on scalar literacy that is required nowadays by globalization.

Clearly, it is only by the end of the book that readers become aware of the development of Clark’s argument towards a new concept of ecocriticism called ‘Anthropocene ecocriticism.’ Also, it is only by the end of the book that readers, invested in ecocriticism and environmental studies, realize that a second reading is necessary to connect what is apparently dissociated and scattered. This is not to say that Clark’s style is difficult to understand but rather that the author has compiled a series of provocative issues that need reflection by asking, for instance, if ‘Anthropocene ecocriticism’ could become a threshold to a new wave of ecocriticism which encompasses the different environmental fields of research. ▣

⁸ Clark, 49.