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An Ecocritical Reading of Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil*

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Abstract

The article reads Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* with the critical tool of ecocriticism. Victorian England witnessed the high rise of industrialism and mechanized culture that deeply affected the ecological balance and had a profound impact on the lives of the common masses. The article examines Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Sybil* with the critical tool of ecocriticism to explore his concerns and criticisms over environmental depletion, toxic environment due to industrial pollution, the suffering of factory workers, and unhealthy living conditions. His description of the contaminated environment, depleted ecology, endangered human life, and exploitation due to the huge gap between the rich and the poor damaging mutual social relations reflect the novel's deeper ecological mode. He kept his faith in humane qualities like compassion, mutuality, and a sense of responsibility in the characters to regain some positivity in ecology for a cohesive social-ecological existence.

Keywords: Victorian, Ecocriticism, Ecology, Toxic, Compassion, Mutuality.

Introduction

Victorian England has always been a hot topic for researchers. There is ample research on the period's social and economic condition, its people, its ideas, its religion, emerging industries, science, and, of course, its writers and literature. The Victorian period is remarkable in the sense that it witnessed the most important reformation of England from being an agrarian country to a powerful industrial nation. Big cities and towns with "technoculture" (Ketabgian 6), huge wealth from the industry that even created sole manufacturing towns like Manchester, and wealth from imperial projects totally changed

the country's social and economic soul and, most importantly, the ecological soul. Carlyle's "Condition of the England" (1) question profoundly influenced Victorian thinkers like Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, and Elizabeth Gaskell, who attempted to raise collective awareness through their writings, especially novels, the consequences of the changes that the country underwent socially, economically, politically, and ecologically. Those authors and their works receive huge attention from present-day scholars as they seem to be a repository of the exact societal condition and conscience of that period. Benjamin Disraeli was one of the prominent political and literary figures of the period. This paper will try to explore Disraeli's novel *Sybil* (1845) by using ecocriticism as a critical tool.

Ecology and Ecocriticism

German Biologist and naturalist Earnest Haeckel first used the term ecology in 1869 to explain the science of reading the connection of the organism to the environment. The word 'ecology' came from two Greek words, *Oikos* and *Logos*. *Oikos* means home, and *logos* means reason or study of ecology, which suggests the connection of human beings with their home (earth). According to Vandana Shiva,

ecology movements are political movements for a non-violent world order in which nature is conserved for conserving the potions for survival. These movements are small, but they are growing. They are local, but their success lies in non-local impact. They demand only the right to survival yet with that minimal demand is associated the right to live in a peaceful and just world.... Unless the world is reconstructed ecologically at the level of world-views and lifestyles, peace and justice will continue to be violated and ultimately the very survival of humanity will be threatened (37).

On the other hand, how human beings are connected to nature and how they interact with nature are the main concerns of ecocriticism. According to Bate, an ecologically conscious mind has concern and love towards nature. Cheryl Glotfelty found that William Rueckert first used the word 'ecocriticism' in 1978 in the essay named "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment of Ecocriticism." According to Glotfelty, for Rueckert, ecocriticism means "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Glotfelty xx). Glotfelty herself defined ecocriticism as "the

study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii).

Greg Garrard's observation is important to show the links between ecology and ecocriticism. He found that

ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology. Ecocritics may not be qualified to contribute to debates about problems in ecology, but they must nevertheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own 'ecological literacy' as far as possible (5).

Carolyn Merchant, in *Radical Ecology*, discussed the "ecocentric ethics" (75). According to Merchant, the goals of ecocentric ethics are the "maintenance of the balance of nature and retention of the unity, stability, diversity, and harmony of the ecosystem...of primary importance is the survival of all living and non-living things as components of healthy ecosystems" (Merchant 76). Merchant then discussed "the partnership ethics" (83). She revealed that her "own synthesis between ecocentrism and environmental justice is partnership ethics" (83). According to Merchant, "a partnership ethic holds that the greatest good for the human and nonhuman communities is in their mutual living interdependence" (83). The concepts of interdependence or mutuality, compassion, and a sense of responsibility are very important in ecocriticism. According to Merchant, partnership ethics are very relevant to resolving all the differences between humans and human beings' relations with the environment. Merchant proposed that humans as partners should have care, compassion, and a sense of responsibility towards each other as well as a responsible attitude towards non-human nature and environment. According to Merchant, it does not mean that humans will not introduce new technologies and science into the ecosystem, but there should be ethical use and proper restraint to maintain a healthy balance of the ecosystem (196-97). The common anxiety that is shared by the ecocritics is the anxiety of a misbalanced earth ecology robbing of life-sustaining forces that endangered the existence of life, including humans.

Ecological Concerns in Victorian Scenario

Victorian England witnessed a toxic environment that became a threat to the ecology. Jesse Oak Taylor's "Where is Victorian Ecocriticism?" finds that Victorian ecology was human ecology. Victorian writers emphasized the quality of life of the common people after the changed physical and social environment. The Victorian problem writers delineated the polluted, noxious environment, the plight of the poor section, the lack of sanitation, extreme filth, contagious diseases, and high mortality. Taylor, in his essay, mentioned Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's monograph *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire: Famines, Fevers and the Literary Cultures of South Asia*. Mukherjee pointed out that Victorian ecocriticism could not be found in nature alone, separated from human beings. It was about the ecology of both humans and non-humans, where nature was very part of human being's biological and cultural entity. So, the main concern was to preserve human ecology to make a better living place, as the Victorians also believed that the environment had a decisive impact on every organism (Taylor 883). Human lives were endangered at that time due to the obnoxious environment and ecology, and the rising industrialism opened the scope for huge exploitation. The intoxication of the atmosphere posed a real risk to living in Victorian England.

Critical Research Review

Critics have usually emphasized Benjamin Disraeli's political views when interpreting his novels like *Coningsby*, *Sybil*, and others. Dr. Diniejko categorized Disraeli's novel *Sybil* as a Condition of England novel as the novel provides a critical presentation of contemporary social and political life. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, in "Why Political Novels Have Heroines: *Sybil*, *Mary Barton*, and *Felix Holt*" also labelled *Sybil* as a political novel. Annette Cozzi, in the book named *The Discourses of Food in Nineteenth Century British Fiction*, perceived that in *Sybil*, the "shift from rural regionalism to the nationalism forged from industrial capitalism is represented by the legislation, commodification, and consumption of grain" (29). She found *Sybil* to be a kind of "*bildungsroman* that aims the construction of a national identity" (23). Michael Flavin's book *Benjamin Disraeli* finds that in the novel *Sybil*, there is interconnection between personal and political.

Suzanne Daly, in “Spinning Cotton: Domestic and Industrial Novels,” observed that “*Sybil* is generally understood to promulgate Disraeli’s political vision, in which a genuinely superior aristocracy is to supervise a social compact between rich and the poor” (275). Martin Fido, in “The Treatment of Rural Distress in Disraeli’s ‘*Sybil*,’” discussed Disraeli’s portrayal of the suffering of poor commoners in rural England. John Parham’s chapter named “Trajectory of a Victorian Ecology” in the book *Green Man Hopkins* rightly points out:

industrialisation and urban expansion created environmental problems — poor sanitation, air quality, deforestation, and pollution — all of which added to equivalent problems in areas such as housing, working conditions, unemployment, or disease. As a consequence of this escalation of risk, Victorian literary culture became characterized by a conspicuous sense of social responsibility — observation, analysis, investigation — which, in turn, helped prompt a spirit of campaigning, political intervention, and legislation to which literary figures, and literary work, contributed (68).

Later, John Parham found out that Disraeli had written with such responsibility. In “‘For You Pollution.’ The Victorian novel and a human ecology: Disraeli’s *Sybil* and Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*,” Parham discerned that Disraeli’s *Sybil* has obvious elements of Green Materialism. It is because the writer deliberately dramatized all the industrial impacts on the physical environment. Parham found Disraeli to be a conscious portrayer of all the degraded living conditions, sanitation, and the endangered ecology, including humans; thus, his novel *Sybil* gets the label of a social, ecological novel. Later, scholars like M. S Kennedy tried to trace ecological awareness in the Victorian period. She discussed how Disraeli presented a toxic atmosphere in rural areas in *Sybil*. This paper will try a thorough ecocritical reading of Disraeli’s novel *Sybil* to unravel environmental and ecological concerns and multiple layers of criticisms that may be embedded in the novel.

Benjamin Disraeli

Disraeli was a conservative with beliefs in the paternalism of aristocrats. Being a very socially active person, he joined politics. His writings began to reveal his anti-Whig and anti-utilitarian views. He became prime minister of England two times. *Sybil* (1845) is part of the trilogy succeeded by *Coningsby* (1844) and followed by *Tancred*

(1847), and the trilogy is known as Young England novels because the author was engaged with the Young England movement. Young England consisted of a group of young Tory idealists who dreamt of making a bond between the rich and the poor by exterminating all the discrepancies. They wanted to regain all the respect for the monarchy, old traditions, and the Church. The infamous Victorian compromise that meant the double standard of English society where the country got all the economic wealth at the cost of exploitation of lower classes and ecology was illustrated in Disraeli's Young England novels.

Sybil

The novel was set in a rural town named Marney. Charles Egremont was the younger brother of Lord Marney. Egremont disguised himself as Mr. Franklin, the journalist, and investigated the living conditions of the poor people of that place. He realised that the rich were unaware of the sufferings of the poor people. He found that his own brother, present Lord Marney, had no sympathy for the common people. When he met Sybil, the beautiful, sensible daughter of Walter Gerard, he fell in love. Walter Gerard worked to improve the lives of poor people. He also met Stephen Morley, who revealed his belief in communal living. Morley had a secret love for Gerard's daughter, Sybil. Mr. Trafford was a noble factory owner who had sympathy for his workers and tried to improve their living and working conditions. Miss Trafford was a well-wisher of Sybil. Gerard and Morley supported the Chartist movement. Sybil came to know about Egremont's good intentions regarding the poor people. She became impressed with Egremont. Walter Gerard died in a chartist agitation. Stephen Morley also died, but before his death, he found one document that would prove Sybil's aristocratic connection. Sybil was mentally shattered. She got support and consolation from Miss Trafford. Ultimately Sybil was united with Charles Egremont, accepting his love.

Ecological Concerns in *Sybil*

At the beginning of the novel *Sybil*, Disraeli presents the picturesque quality of the external environment of the rural town Marney only to show the degraded, poisonous environment inside the town

ironically. The place had an eye-soothing scenic view as it was situated in a dale with a small river surrounded by a garden, meadows, and hills of dense wood. But it was a “beautiful illusion! For behind that laughing landscape, penury, and disease fed upon the vitals of a miserable population!” (*Sybil* 1: 116). Inside, the picture was dirty and desolate, with open sewer drainage and stagnant pools of obnoxious smell. He sensationalized the dirt and the disease with graphic detailing. The poor people’s cottages

looked more like the top of a dunghill than a cottage. Before the doors of these dwellings, and often surrounding them, ran open drains full of animal and vegetable refuse, decomposing into disease, or sometimes in their imperfect course filling foul pits or spreading into stagnant pools, while a concentrated solution of every species of dissolving filth was allowed to soak through and thoroughly impregnate the walls and ground adjoining (*Sybil* 1: 117-18).

M. S Kennedy observed that Disraeli presented “damp and noxious rural atmospheres such as Marney” (511). Disraeli showed how the future generation was at risk when he repeatedly portrayed high infant mortality incidents in the novel. There was an incident of incendiaryism that became a serious tendency during the period (*Sybil* 1: 248).

The mining industry destroyed and poisoned the natural environment of the mining region. Smoke obstructed the rays of the sun. Heaps of coal and dust polluted the environment. Every street should be stepped on carefully as there was a mouth of coal pits. The area lacked any sight of greenery. So, nature was completely barred out there. Workers used to work in the riskiest conditions in the mines, getting the most brutal treatment. They were treated as machines. Human emotion was also barren there, just like the barren nature lacking natural, emotional sensibilities. The absence of nature deprived them of the soothing, creative influence of nature. The absence of such influence made the lives of the dwellers gloomy. The workers’ way of life became savage as they got the most savage treatment. They were like

swarming multitude: bands of stalwart men, broad-chested and muscular, wet with toil, and black as the children of the tropics... naked to the waist, an iron chain fastened to a belt of leather runs between their legs... hauls and hurries tubs of coals up subterranean

roads, dark, precipitous, and flashy: that seems to have escaped the notice of the Society for the Abolition of Negro Slavery (*Sybil* 2: 3 - 4).

The suffering and the distress of those mine workers reminded the author of the plight of the Negro slaves. Disraeli harshly criticized those English gentlemen who condemned the brutal treatment of the Negro slaves but remained totally ignorant of the inhuman condition such poor working sections were forcefully enduring. Even the rich gentlemen practiced such brutality with the employed.

Wodgate had all the ill effects of industry where "a tree could not be seen, a flower was unknown" (*Sybil* 2: 53). There was not even any church or parish. The absence of any creative, artistic thing indicated the absence of nature. Wodgate men were ignorant as they were barren, not immoral, as they did not have any humane qualities. Wodgate was the filthiest place with the worst sanitation and disease. Stephen Morley observed how human lives were very vulnerable there. Most of the natives were physically deformed as Morley found "rickety, smoke-dried, lank and haggard" boys, "stunted and meagre" (*Sybil* 2: 60) girls whose "cramping postures" (*Sybil* 2: 60) were all result of inhumanly heavy works and torture. The author's immediate change of scene from Wodgate to the most serene beauty of nature in Gerard's cottage reflects the author's intention to present accurately the 'best' and the 'worst' picture of the atmosphere only to highlight how much different the 'worst' was from the 'best'. *Sybil* and her father, Gerard, had a close bond with nature, and the natural abundance in their cottage made them sensitive human beings with humane and emotional qualities. Their beautiful chemistry with their pet dog, Harold, revealed them as compassionate and caring human beings (*Sybil* 2: 66-69). They had what ecofeminists term an "interconnected sense of self" (Gaard 3). Disraeli consequently presented two different places in two different chapters, probably to show the constructing role nature plays in the formation of the ecology of a place and its dwellers as Vandana Shiva observed: "Nature as Prakriti is inherently active, a powerful, productive force in the dialectic of the creation, renewal, and sustenance of all life" (38). Nature is a life-sustaining and enhancing force that soothes and nourishes. The absence of such a nourishing influence of Nature becomes degenerating for ecology and its organisms, as Disraeli had already shown in places like the mining district and Wodgate.

He presented a place just half a mile away from Marney in a less polluted environment with fresh water, dense woods, and “luxuriant vegetation” (*Sybil* 1: 128). Charles Egremont found remnants of the old abbey, which once had a very sustaining role in the lives of the helpless poor, giving them food and shelter. The old building of the Abbey church was a symbol used by Disraeli to present the old system of society, the old aristocracy. The old aristocracy had a very reciprocal relationship with the poor ones, guiding them as their guardian. All the things in the old abbey reminded Egremont of the old system of society and the old aristocracy. Egremont felt that the old connection was cut. Egremont “amidst these solemn ruins, offered the perfection of solitude;” (*Sybil* 1: 133-34) and thought, “why was England not the same land as in the days of his light-hearted youth?” (*Sybil* 1: 134). Disraeli was quite depressed about the fact that the poor people who were pillars of English wealth and progress were forced to live the most depleted lives. So, the poor remained only the instruments or objects for earning profits and luxury for the upper classes. Disraeli criticized such social exploitation.

Sybil’s father proudly recollected the memories of the old aristocracy. They once gave nice monasteries with greenery, neat farms, clean water, and gardens. Stephen observed that the monasteries proposed communal living, which gave a sense of unity. He found such a sense of connection was dead afterward. Alienated life in cities and towns merely for one’s own sake made people selfish, cutting all sense of connection with nature and among themselves. According to Stephen, communal living was necessary for a healthy living place. Through Stephen, Disraeli questioned the national concept of England (*Sybil* 1: 146-48). Disraeli found two nations in England: one of the Rich’s and the other of the Poor’s, living totally apart without any mutuality (*Sybil* 1: 150).

The industrial city of Mowbray was portrayed to show the harmful consequences of industry and factories on the physical environment. Disraeli portrayed the place with high chimneys, big factories, smoke hovering over the sky as clouds, soot, and labourer’s dingy slums. The factories had an unhealthy working environment without proper ventilation and sanitation, which was thus highly dangerous for the workers. Disraeli referred to the infanticide

practiced in slums. The children were vulnerable to fatal accidents as they were left alone in their homes and sometimes became handicapped for their entire lives. Workers like Dandy Mick suffered such accidents in childhood. Another worker, Devil Dust, grew even without a name until the age of five, escaping all dangers.

The author presented the exploitation of the child's innocence in those mines where children of younger, tender ages worked in the dark alone. The conversations among the workers revealed their daily suffering in dark, damp cellars. The incident of the innocent little child who was starved but came to buy food for his sick mother and ultimately dying from the violent confusion in the shop shocks readers with the meaninglessness of poor lives there (*Sybil* 2: 48-49). Among the working class, seventeen was the average life expectancy, showing how life was at risk there. In Victorian England, the poor, marginalized sections became the victims of contagious diseases more, and the rich remained ignorant of that. The unequal distribution of risk due to environmental hazards was seen in English society as the poor, helpless people were more vulnerable to toxicity as they were malnourished and were forced to live and work in unhealthy environments and had huge exposure to harmful materials and chemicals.

He presented the plight of the once happy farmers who were the victims of the English economy's change from agrarian to industrial. The farmer became waged labourers. Sarcastically, the author presented how the waged labourers themselves remained starved after cultivating "the broad fields of merry England" (*Sybil* 1: 121). Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, used the term "instrumentalism" (53) or objectification, which, according to her, is the feature of a dualistic hierarchized society. Plumwood thought that the upper side of the hierarchy, that is, the elite, rich class: the 'self' objectified the poor, marginalized section and used them as instruments to fulfill their greed. The waged labourers of England that Disraeli portrayed in *Sybil* were such instruments who were exploited by the rich landowners to gain profit.

In the pre-industrial era, people were peasants who cultivated their own land, which earned them a decent life and peace in their cottages. However, the advent of industrialization forced them to

migrate to towns and live in rented cellars. They became deprived of the basic sustenance of life. In the growing industry of Victorian England, factory production and earning profit became very important for the English economy, but that made the life of the poor, common people degenerate. As Vandana Shiva rightly pointed out, “when commodity production as the prime economic activity is introduced as development, it destroys the potential of nature...for basic needs. More commodities and more cash mean less life” (7).

Sybil was very soft-hearted and had a unique, compassionate sense of connection with other human and nonhuman beings. She was empathetic, just like her father. She believed that if “the people support the people, the divine blessing will not be wanting” (*Sybil* 1: 277). She gave all the nourishments: food, warmth, comfort, compassion, and love to the starved family of her father’s weaver friend Warner. The author presented Sybil’s motherly affection through her tender care and love for the little child of Warner (*Sybil* 1: 274-75). Sybil carried her father’s belief in old medieval aristocracy, whose parental guidance helped the poor a lot. Gerard was keen to observe the deep chasm between the two classes- the rich and the poor. The relationship among the Englishmen was not so warm anymore. Gerard tried to break Egremont’s illusion of English progress based on statistical data, and it reminded him of the older days, the pre-industrial era when common people had decent living styles with sufficient food, drink, clothes, and cottages (*Sybil* 2: 76-77).

Carolyn Merchant in *Radical Ecology* suggested human beings’ ethical use of new technology with proper restraint to maintain a healthy balance in ecology (196-97). Disraeli portrayed the factory owner, Mr. Trafford, in such a way. Mr. Trafford had a very warm and mutual understanding with his workers. Trafford’s sensible heart made all the safe and healthy arrangements for his workers in the factory and living places. In Trafford’s factory, there was good ventilation and proper sanitation, and workers had decent homes with beautiful gardens, public baths, and horticulture. By depicting Trafford’s efforts, the author delineated the picture of an ideal village ecology with a cleaner environment. Such a positive ecology of the place positively influenced the minds of his workers. They remained honest and happy with moral sensibilities (*Sybil* 2: 97-101).

Egremont thought that men like Mr. Trafford were needed to improve the lives of the poor workers. However, Morley thought communal living was the perfect solution for reconstructing society. Egremont became the representative of a new aristocracy who had a profound sense of responsibility towards others. Egremont assured Sybil that the new generation of aristocrats were sensible and compassionate, not tyrants. Suzanne Daly observed,

the dishonest practices of the mill owners like Shuffle and Screw are contrasted with the enlightened system put in place by Mr. Trafford...who practices benevolent paternalism, housing and educating his workers and providing them with safe working conditions (276).

The author had positive hopes regarding new aristocrats to create sustainable mutuality among the people of English society. The novel ends on a very positive note. Though Gerard died, most of the other good characters have happy domestic lives, giving at least a positive balance in human ecology. Though at the end of the novel, Sybil's noble identity was revealed but, she remained the representative of the people, and her marriage with Egremont presents an "idealized alliance of High Toryism with the people" (Parham, "For" 32).

Conclusion

Parham rightly pointed out that the author of *Sybil* illustrated "dramatization of the consequences of industrialization on the physical existence" ("For" 6). Disraeli showed how environmental and ecological hazards affected and depleted human lives as they were integral parts of nature and ecology. So, in *Sybil*, one can find the apparent presence of most of the commonly avowed tenets of ecocriticism. Disraeli showed how the environment was badly affected by the pollution from factories and industrial waste. The novel has illustrations of some serene natural environment still undamaged by human interference in a few areas of the countryside. The contrast of such places with the industrially devastated areas emphasized the high price the English environment and ecology paid for the industrial and urban projects. Disraeli presented the damaged ecology's intense reaction to human lives and society. Ecocritics believe that human beings are part of the cohesive whole that is earth

(Garrard 24); any change in earth's ecology will have obvious effects on human life and society. As Vandana Shiva pointed out, "assumed categories of progress and development destroy the living forces which arise from relationships within the 'web of life'" (3). Disraeli presented and critiqued both the life-destroying forces and the "life-support systems" (Shiva 7) in the novel against the backdrop of an ecological crisis period due to industrial advancement and mechanized urbanism.

The novel has an accurate portrayal of all the environmental damage and ecological disharmony that the Victorians had to endure as hazardous consequences of industrial and urban infrastructures. Disraeli's sense of ecology, like the Victorian sense of ecology, includes human lives and societal concerns, as Mukherjee suggested. Disraeli portrayed some characters with true "ecological self" (Plumwood 154), like Gerard, his daughter Sybil, and the aristocrat Egremont. "The ecological self can be viewed as a type of relational self, one which includes the goal of the flourishing of earth others and the earth community among its own primary ends, and hence respects or cares for these others for their own sake" (Plumwood 154-55). "Concepts of care, solidarity and friendship" (Plumwood 155) are vital in such ecological self. Disraeli's effort to retrieve some ecological balance in the novel was by giving the characters happiness and peace through compassion, a sense of responsibility, and healthy mutual relationships among themselves. Educated, sensible new aristocrats like Egremont played a creative role in regaining the peace of the place. Carolyn Merchant's partnership ethic (83) suggested care, compassion, mutuality among humans for each other, and a sense of responsibility towards living and non-living beings to overcome ecological problems. Disraeli suggested compassion, reciprocal relationships, and sensible, responsible attitudes of characters like Gerard, Egremont, Sybil, and Mr. Trafford as his way of solution to helping incohesive social-ecological existence. So, it can be said that Disraeli's novel *Sybil* reflects "ecological literacy" (Garrard 5) meticulously.

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