

# The Notion of Nature in Literature, Philosophy and Contemporary World: A Study

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The world is represented by both philosophy and literature. Both are clearly different, yet overlapped and related to one another in various ways. The idea of nature is most widely employed in philosophy and literature. Aristotle and Descartes rested on the concept of nature to explain the fundamental tenets of their views. Aristotle considers “natural world as a causal system consisting of a celestial and a sublunary part causally interconnected in a specific way” (Falcon, 2005). The philosophical tradition that traces back to Aristotle uses the idea of nature to explain the essence of a thing. One of the most fundamental metaphysical concepts, the essence indicates those properties that define what a thing is. According to Anstey and Schuster:

Aristotle’s doctrine that all knowledge started with sense perception gave priority to natural philosophy over all other disciplines, and the adoption of Aristotelianism meant that the point of entry into a philosophically-grounded theology was natural philosophy, tying the fate of Christian theology to natural

philosophy in an unprecedented way. As a result, natural philosophy became the discipline on which theological and philosophical arguments turned, from the thirteenth century onwards. (Anstey and Schuster, 2005, p.132)

The essence of water, for example, will be its molecular structure and the essence of a human will be its self-consciousness or its soul. Many a times the idea of nature is instead used to refer to anything that exists in the universe as part of the physical world.

In the Renaissance there were two conflicting ways of looking at nature. On the one hand, the view inherited from the Middle Ages was that, since Adam and Eve's ejection from paradise, nature had become degraded and degrading. On the other hand, the Greek and Roman literature that inspired Renaissance writers often depicted pastoral life as more virtuous than city life. An explosion of interest in nature was seen during the age of Enlightenment, even Newton believed the ordered perfection of the natural world pre-supposed the existence of God. The orderly aspect of the nature were dragging them towards the science through the world of nature. ([www.access-literature.cappelendamn](http://www.access-literature.cappelendamn))

Followers of the Romantic Movement saw primitive people in different light. They were in possession of something as closeness to nature and had developed a relationship with it. For Romantic poets like Wordsworth, the English countryside is a constant source of poetic inspiration. At a time when industrialization begun and made its mark on the nature in the form of mounting cities and smoking chimneys and they started trod in the lap of nature in a religious way. For Romantics particularly Wordsworth, communion with the natural world is essential for spiritual growth. Wordsworth lives out this belief in practice by walking many miles a day in his beloved Lake District. Xu, Hongxia in her remarkable work *The Poet as Teacher: Wordsworth's Practical And Poetic Engagement With Education* says:

Nature is "perhaps the most complex word" in the English language, according to Raymond Williams who identifies three areas of meanings.

Materiality of Nature (2002) remarks that within Romantic writing and criticism, the term “nature” may be taken “as a referent for a materialistic fate.... When it comes to Wordsworth’s poetry, the issue is especially intriguing because his verses embody all these aspects. H. W. Garrod in 1923 cautioned readers about the need to distinguish various senses in which Wordsworth used the word nature. “Even where he uses ‘nature’ as the equivalent of the external world, or our experience of it, it is his habit to colour that meaning with meanings derived from many of the other very vague uses of the word,”(Hongxia,2013,p.114)

In modern era, science and technology covers every sphere of life and causes tremendous pollution, ecological imbalance and devastation of natural resources. Iqbal believes that the modern world has marched towards new heights in the above fields but the man has become the man without human qualities. Sincerity, honesty and humaneness have become rare and are found in books only. The vast scientific learning and academic excellence has turned individuals into machines who could hardly benefit humanity without any selfish gains. It is the continuous “conflict between the one’s self and actions has been the major cause of man’s degradation” (Munawwar, 2011). The natural scenery has always been the source of inspiration for early poets and philosophers. In contrast the modern poet is no longer the lover of hills rather he prefers the bustling noise of the cities. However, ever since the poets and philosophers who shifted their interest from nature to artificial have been left aloof to struggle and fight, for the words they write doesn’t help the arid souls to quench their thirst. The below few lines form one of the poems titled, ‘A Visit to Pahalgam’ by Faisal Barkat would attest to the fact that it is the lap of nature where one can attain peace and tranquility:

*Wine that dashes with loud and in vex  
Quenches the thirst of an arid soul*

*People of all genera have a reason to be here  
For thoughts, feelings, joy and fun*

**(A Visit to Pahalgam’)**

The fact of the matter is that, history repeats itself, and the time has come again knocking with great force calling human race to nature.

Simona Alias is of the opinion that “Socrates, Plato and Aristotle begun the European civilization and it changes the western view of nature” (Alias, 2010). Aristotle creates a link between “new philosophical perspective based on existentialistic principles and an epistemological approach based on rationality and on direct observation of the natural world and its manifestations” (Alias, 2010, p42). The world that lies beneath heavens is the subject for direct sensibility and understanding. Aristotle figure out the individual and separate existence of all that is not human. The things other than human beings acquire their own identity as per Aristotle and they also gain the interest of humans. He defines nature and classifies it by means of logic and according him “logic is an important instrument for the acquisition of knowledge” (Sharma, 2004) and such attitude towards the world which resulted from these philosophical systems and perceptions brought about an unforgettable change. It developed in humans to conquer, dominate and understand the world and at the same time develop a sense of respect and appreciation of the natural world. In the words of Friedrich Schelling that there is a “profound kinship between the human spirit and nature” (Taylor, 2005). We see the eighteenth century inherited a long tradition deriving from Greek antiquity that maintains the nature can be understood by the exercise of rationality. The long shadow cast by such intellectual position is evident for much of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in connection between natural philosophy and philosophical enterprise of explaining the fundamental purposes that founds the works of God and mankind.

Natural philosophy remains the branch of philosophy along with metaphysics, logic and moral philosophy. Observation on nature brings moral philosophy close to natural philosophy because both are in search of nature or fact. The word nature or the idea of nature is not easy to define and explain and philosophers have always tried to delineate the same in different ways. According to Aristotle, “the sky is the perfect sphere of which the earth is supposed to be the centre; nature is everything within this sphere” (Thilly, 2012). It has many meanings in different languages and should be fingered with care and this “idea of nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history” (William, 1980). Nature conveys most complex and number of significations. In literature the idea of nature remained supreme particularly in Romantics and they believe that:

Nature means the tangible object of the divine creation, the processes of growth and decay, the developmental stages and dissolution of all created things that helps us to the awareness of the greater power behind all that we see and behold. This lead to the fact that ecstasy which the senses attain in this state of awareness is of inestimable value to the poetic mind. **(Wuraola, 2011, p.19)**

Nature usually denotes something outside of the human sphere and sometimes, unconsciously, it is also used to describe ourselves, emotions and feelings. But in reality nature is, those areas of earth that are not inhabited by human, where natural scenery is not changed or modified by humans, a place where animals, birds, and variety of trees are not disturbed by science and technology. The world of diversity often appeals and attracts the human beings particularly poets and philosophers and even ordinary men, though he sees it through different angle. Nature and humanity are not two different worlds. Every age inherits a variety of different cultures and traditions and same is the case with the middle Ages that too inherited these things and ideas of nature and man's relationship with nature. George Hegel in *The Philosophy of Nature*, shares:

Nature has presented itself as the idea in the form of otherness. Since in nature the idea is as the negative of itself or is external to itself nature is not merely external in relation to this idea, but the externality constitutes the determination in which nature as nature exists..... In nature, not only is the play of forms unbound and unchecked in contingency, but each figure for itself lacks the concept of itself. The highest level to which nature drives its existence is life, but as only a natural idea this is at the mercy of the unreason of externality, and individual vitality is in each moment of its existence entangled with an individuality which is other to it, whereas in every expression of the spirit is contained the moment of free, universal self-relation. – Nature in general is justly determined as the decline of the idea from itself because in the element of externality it has the determination of the inappropriateness of itself with itself **(Hegel, 2004, p.1)**

The “Greek philosophy has influenced the European civilization, its culture and development and its attitude towards natural world” (Alias, 2010). The main source behind its initiation is the philosophy of Socrates. Socrates turned the intellectual vision inwards, and the man became the subject of the philosopher. The change brought by the philosophical systems and speculation towards the nature changed it radically. The psychological pressure was decreased when man liberate his self from false deity and ancestral gods. The man saw a lot of things in nature due to observation and he felt free and consoled.

Aristotle’s philosophy of nature offers an idea and interpretation of nature which manages to balance the need for understanding of the natural world and morals, as well as spiritual side of mankind. For Aristotle, “nature reveals herself as an artist of infinite capacity, universally choosing the simplest and the best means of arriving at her goal” (Thilly, 2012). Nature is the physical reality through which humans perceive, acknowledge, and understand the divine. The creator created nature and influences it, through nature man understands the creator and tries to develop a connection between him and His creator. Nature and art are two different entities, art can be initiated from nature but nature cannot be initiated from any art and “what distinguishes nature from art is this: The goal at which the artist aims exists in his thought as a clearly conceived idea, while in nature it exists as an instinct” (Thilly, 2012, p.93). Simona Alias in, *An Ecocritical Approach to Chaucer*, is of the opinion that there was wave of:

...an intellectual and cultural transformation in twelfth century and it changed all spheres of man like religious, literary, philosophical and scientific. In this era spreading of Latin translation of Arabic and Greek texts introduced into Europe by the Arabs increased the exercise of learning new knowledge (Alias,2010,p.84).

Nature has been defined as an idea in every era according to the belief and the understanding of the people. According to Benson, he says “it has often been suggested that not since the late Antiquity had personified nature been so strongly recognized as a vital world force of almost supreme magnitude as it was in the twelfth century” (Benson,1982). One can deduce from the previous lines that nature was a vital force in 12<sup>th</sup> century. The idea of nature defined

philosophically and theologically in twelfth century showed the relationship between nature and creation, between humanity and nature, between nature and God and lastly between God and humanity. According to H. White “nature is personified as a power operative in the constitution and organization of the universe” (White, 1989). Nature is God’s work and the human nature “exhibits profound affinities with the natural world” (Wetherbee, 1990). This affinity between the man and the nature is the source of harmony and according to Hugh White that “if human beings were to follow the law of nature, they would be in harmony with God’s purposes” (White, 1989, p.85). The natural world shows the greatness of God.

The Western European Christian world has known forms of respectful and sustainable attitude towards the nature from ancient times. In the Middle Ages there settled a view of nature, either it as a destructive force or as the symbol of ancestral human fears. The Christian thinkers of this age see nature as a personification of evil and the devil. It is Arabic culture which contributed to Europe, when introduced, as its own tradition. It is through Arabs, the medieval west revalued the status of nature. The philosophers and religious people were eager to understand and explain the importance of nature. The idea of nature played a central role in developing a relationship between nature and humanity during this era. As already mentioned in previous lines that, nature is a creation of God and common origin of nature and man inspired in people a respect for nature. George Hegel says “Nature is to be viewed as a system of stages, in which one stage necessarily arises from the other and is the truth closest to the other from which it results, though not in such a way that the one would naturally generate the other, but rather in the inner idea which constitutes the ground of nature” (Hegel, 2004, p.2).

In Middle Ages the “concept and idea of nature and Chaucer’s idea of nature, is very different from that of the Modern Age. It is related not only to the natural and physical environment, but also to the spiritual the religious and has effects on the political and social spheres” (Alias, 2010). Chaucer’s contemporaries Gower and Langland also provides representations of man’s reflection upon its relationship with nature. Nature is perceived as divine and sublime in literature, art and nature writing. In European culture “nature has been typically perceived of as the ‘other’: a vast but delimited facet of existence, pure and self-sustaining, something to be conserved, preserved and managed” (Lewis, 2007). For them it “is a combination of the legacy



left to us by the Judeo-Christian tradition” (Lewis, 2007, p.2). European Romanticism’s complex understanding of the word nature and that “must be seen against the background of eighteenth century” (Taylor, 2005) and the growth of the industrialization. In this era nature has been understood differently and “ceased to be a mere backdrop to human activity and became the place where human beings could be closest to themselves and to God” (Taylor, 2005, p.1422).The complex Romantic view of nature has continued to influence our thinking. They regard “nature as a primary source of education” (Taylor, 2005, p.1424). During Romantic era or movement, the main and distinguished theme has remained attention to nature and it is a renewal of psychology and spirituality for them.

As for the Eastern thought of nature is concerned, it is gaining its momentum in the West since the “past several decades as the Westerners seek relief for their tortured bodies, psyches and emotions endangered by a dichotomous relationship with nature” (Lewis, 2007, p.25). At the same time Eastern philosophy is gaining its popularity in the Europe particularly in United States, J.F. Lewis says in his book that “nature in Western culture is the product of a monotheistic religious tradition; it is often unrecognizable for people whose cultures have not taught them to worship a lone deity” (Lewis, 2007, p.20). The idea of nature in literature and philosophy has many sources, the religion, without doubt, is one of them. When the same is influenced by the religion, it provides an ample and rich material to it. The Nobel Qur’an and the Bible constitute themselves the great literature. These sacred Books have many eye opening verses about nature, which ultimately has made the nature poetry as an appealing one with religious fervor. Let us begin with the Bible, it says in the *Book of Job*:

*But ask the animals, and they will teach, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you.*

**(Job,12:7-8)**

Also in the *Book of Psalm*, further says:

*Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea and resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant*



*and everything in them all the trees of the forest will sing  
for joy.*

**(Psalm 96:11-12)**

It further says in the *Book of Psalm*:

*The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird  
themselves with the meadows clothe themselves flocks, the  
valley deck themselves with grain.*

**(Psalm 65:12-13)**

It says in the *Song of Solomon*:

*Flowers are appearing on the earth. The season for singing has come. The cooing of  
doves is heard in our land.*

**(Song of Solomon 2:12)**

Nature is something which is affected by culture and understanding, Eastern or Western. In this regard J.F. Lewis has written:

To more fully grasp and perceive these adverse consequences of popular understandings of nature in the West, it befits one to look collectively at Western society and culture. One simply need examine the manner in which cities and towns have been historically constructed to notice the underlying ideological and religious paradigm affecting the West's relationship with nature. Most of our cities, for example, did little to synthesize their development with what was deemed to be the natural world around them **(Lewis, 2007, p.21)**.

The Western religious scholars believe that nature is something created by God and the "natural philosophy is essentially about God and his creation" **(Anstey and Schuster, 2005)**. Nature is sacred because it is the creation of God and at the same time "in the minds of many educated Europeans of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment's attack on superstition, and the successes of

Copernican astronomy and Newtonian physics, removed God from his throne” (Ferber, 2010). In Hinduism there is a belief that there is no separation between the Divine and the world of nature, in this respect the Hindu scripture, *Yejurveda*, says:

*The sweet dawn will sweeten your soul,  
The dazzling mid-day will set your hearts  
And the serene music of your soul will guide  
you towards peace and prosperity.  
And when the days task over, you will sleep  
in the lap of Mother nature.*

**(Yejurveda,34.37)**

The Noble Quran has number of verses about nature and natural world. In chapter Al- Mulk it says:

*Do they not observe the birds above them, spreading  
their wings and folding them in? None can uphold them  
except (God) Most Gracious.*

**(The Quran, Chapter 67, Verse 19)**

It further says in *chapter Al-Hajj* (Pilgrimage):

*See you not that whoever is on the earth, and the sun, and the moon,  
and the stars ,and the trees and moving creatures.*

**(The Quran, Chapter 22, Verse 18)**

In chapter *Al Nahl* it says:

*With it He produces for you corn, olives, date-palms, grapes, and every kind of  
fruit: verily in this is a Sign for those who give thought. He has made subject*

*to you the Night and the Day; the Sun and the Moon; and the Stars are in subjection by His Command: verily in this are Signs for men who are wise.*

**(The Quran, Chapter 16, Verse 11-12)**

Thus as per the religious texts are concerned nature reserves a special place and is considered as the beginning and the end of every entity. The word nature doesn't signify mere the beautiful landscape, rather it has a much wider scope, it is something to be felt in each and every microscopic entity that exists around us.

George Brandes in *Romantic Naturalism* says that:

Naturalism is the English literature's special variant of the living sense of nationality that was spreading all over Europe at the time. In Germany the poets were looking back to the German past and Middle Ages. In England the gaze of the poets turned to the landscapes of their own country **(Brandes, 1925, P.11)**

During the Renaissance "the idea of the world of nature as self-creative and self-regulating, combined with the idea of nature as a machine, gave rise to a materialistic theory of nature" **(Collingwood, 1945)**. Why does a waterfall, the sunset, and other such natural scenes and phenomena affect us? Because, there is a certain harmony of colour or sound in them. We ourselves are created by a harmony of elements, and our spirit always seeks the same balance and harmony in everything else. It is the harmony that creates beauty. Nature demands that this harmony should exist everywhere, and that is what prompts and inspire the philosophers to remain in constant touch of nature. Many Romanticist (artists), writers, and philosophers believe in the natural world as a source of healthy emotions and ideas. By contrast, the emerging urban, industrialized world was often portrayed as a source of unhealthy emotions, morals, and thoughts.

The idea of nature in philosophy and literature has changed comparatively in modern era. George Hegel believes:

Nature is, in itself a living whole. The movement of its idea through its sequence of stages is more precisely this: the idea posits itself as that which it is in itself; or, what is the same thing, it goes into itself out of that immediacy and externality which is death in order to go into itself; yet further, it suspends this determinacy of the idea, in which it is only life, and becomes spirit, which is its truth. (Hegel, 2004, p.2)

The nature was something spiritual in the past centuries, and it used to be the central theme of the poetry. In current times this nature is being seen through the scientific prism that how one could harness its benefits. The people have lost touch with the world of nature. Romanticists fell in love with nature and produced beautiful poetry but in current era science has pulled the humanity far away from the lap of nature of consequences of which the entire human race has been paying. J.F. Lewis quotes Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz:

The progress made by science and technology has not always been negative. It has been of immense service to mankind. Of course, there are some destructive aspects, but I think that this process of dehumanization can be fought with the aid of two great forces: religion and art. ...I am optimistic that science, guided by a sense of awareness, can constantly adjust its trajectory. Art and religion are there to guide the way. (Lewis, 2007, p.62-63)

James Lewis Fielding has aptly diagnosed the cause of cutting ones relationship with the world of nature in this nuclear age and he says:

In the wake of science, which, despite its remarkable understanding of physical matter, has failed to arrive at any form of metaphysical certainty, what way of knowing may become transcendent, or, if not transcendent, respectably incorporated into our current episteme and understanding of nature, ourselves, and our existence? Indeed, even in regard to physicality,

the scope of science is still extremely limited.....broadens how we come to think about and live with and within nature and ourselves and to which we can only gain insight through poetry and other artistic vehicles that afford us intelligent access to this fundamental–and vital–aspect of existence (**Lewis, 2007, p.66-71**)

The importance of nature in today's fast age of science and technology has increased to a greater extent; human race is looking for those unsound healing taps of the Mother Nature. Thus in order to attain the blessings of nature one must learn to live in the company of nature. It is important to note the changing definitions of nature, in fact it is the power of nature that has made the modern age man to shift from his artificial environment towards the peace and tranquility. Contrary to aesthetic point of view of nature poetry, modern science has open up new vista regarding the importance of world of nature. Now it is realized that:

Nature is essential for human existence, health, development and well-being. Yet in recent years humans in developed countries have had much less contact with nature than in previous times. This, not surprisingly, for many leads to a reaction of pervasive fear and mistrust of the natural world. Unfortunately this results in a viscous cycle of building structures and societies that remove humans further from the natural world causing a higher degree of alienation from nature which leads to more destruction and inappropriate and unsustainable use of the natural world. This alienation also leads to more dysfunction and disease in the human population (**Mitten, 2009, p.47**)

Nature was perceived as divine and sublime in literature, art, and nature writing. It has been the subject of poetry and philosophy for humans since ages. However, the idea of nature eventually got changed with the passage of time. A.J. Vetlesen is of the opinion that “nature, before and after the quantum theory, is that which is to be comprehended mathematically; even what cannot be made to agree, indissolubility and irrationality, is converted by means of mathematical theorems” (**Vetlesen,2015,p.57**).

**Conclusion:**

The definition of nature is one such complex issues that could never be brought to consensus even discussing for ages. For the laymen it means the blissful environment around and for writers and philosophers the source of inspiration. In reality nature is both, the pain and ease, the healer and the maimer, the giver and the taker, in short nature is all that exists around. This definition of nature encompass each and every entity of what we can see and feel. The broader definition of nature explains the daily activities of every unit that exists and the connection of thoughts that directly or indirectly influence each other. Nature demands attention in the times when man challenges and disturbs it (nature) in the disguise of technology.

Thus in order to understand nature it becomes necessary to come out from the present age fast track life into the lap of nature and spend some meaningful time therein. Romantic poets were the true lover of nature who wrote under the shade of autumn leaves and pouring clouds.

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