

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of  
*Refuge: An Unnatural History  
of Family and Place*

Terry Tempest Williams  
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NISSI KARUNYA  
Lady Doak College

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## NISSI KARUNYA

In this 'post-truth' age, time tested values are being questioned, including the relevance of ethics and religion in light of the present-day environmental debilitation. Ecological crisis, a contemporary reality has triggered a paradigm shift in human thinking and discourse facilitating the reversal of polarities between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Greening of religion is a novel approach to the interpretation of religious literature which has led to the rereading and reinterpretation of religious texts from a biocentric perspective. The purpose of this study is to identify how literature reflects religious ethics centred on ecology, which accentuates on the interrelationship between nature, culture and humanity and to validate how ecological ethics of religions can be an antidote to environmental crisis.

One of the interesting speculations of literature is its exploration of the relationship between the Earth and the inner world of man. The notion of 'environment' which means 'the surrounding' has been unified with the physical, emotional and spiritual spheres of mankind by some writers who reflected that religion, which was once speculated to be an icon of culture, is gradually being identified with nature. Thus earth and spirit bound religious values can be seen as an intermediary between nature and culture. Nature, culture, human reality and religion are interconnected like web and their interrelationship is not a hierarchy. Each of these cannot be understood in isolation instead they should be perceived and interpreted in relation to each other.

This paper studies the perspectives of religion regarding environmental conservation. Through a close reading of the literary text *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by Terry Tempest Williams, this paper aims to validate how the

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ecological ethics of religions can be a solution to environmental crisis and how this ecological reformation in spirituality should be given the intellectual respect it deserves.

*Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* is one of the striking memoirs by Terry Tempest Williams in which she records the ecological phenomenon of the Great Salt Lake desert in relation to her Mormon family saga. In this work of creative nonfiction, she draws a parallel between her mother's battle with cancer and depletion of nature as the Great Salt Lake began to increase in record heights, threatening a wide and rare variety of birds like Virginia Rail, Ruddy Duck, Northern Pintail and Snowy Egrets in the Bear River Migratory Refuge. As a writer and naturalist, Williams shows how these incidents outside her impact her personal life and importantly her spiritual life. She skilfully interweaves physical world and spirituality to transform this memoir into a document of inner healing and spiritual grace. This work is also a quest to understand and realise man's rightful place and responsibility in nature's large design. The spiritual sensibility of the author is shaped by an ethic of ecological survival.

Great Salt Lake: wilderness adjacent to the city; a shifting shoreline that plays havoc with highways; islands too stark, too remote to inhabit; water in the desert that no one can drink. It is the liquid lie of the west. (Williams 5)

The voice of the author while describing the Great Salt Lake is biocentric, resounding the anti-anthropocentric stance of ecotheology that not everything has been created for man's utility.

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Ensuing the publication of the article “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” in 1967 by Lynn White, Jr., the pertinence of theology to the modern environment became an intensely debatable issue in the western academic circle. In this work, White presented the theory of the

Christian paradigm which holds the essence of human dominion over nature which has led to ecological devastation yielding a voice for ‘ecological complaint’. Following this, a group of theologians headed by Jack Rogers initiated the re-reading and interpretation of the Bible in quest of a pertinent theological model that appropriately assesses the relationship between God, human beings and creation. It was a remarkable ecological reformation in Biblical hermeneutics.

William’s description of the ‘shifting shoreline that plays havoc with highways’; stark islands that are too remote to ‘inhabit’; water in the desert that cannot be ‘used’ for drinking, is a clarion call for a shift from a consumerist to a conservationist attitude towards nature. Not everything created in this world is of ‘use’ to human beings and that doesn’t mean that God undermines their value. Job’s confrontation with God in Job 40 and 41 throws light on this point. Quelled by his misfortune, Job questions God about his unmerited suffering. God does not answer his question directly, but hauls Job’s attention to his creation, particularly the Behemoth and Leviathan. Certain things are brought into existence, God implies, simply to manifest the resplendence of His act of creation.

In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, nature, especially the avian life is portrayed as an intermediary between heaven and earth. In the act of worship, creation cannot be shunned away as something irrelevant to man’s rela-

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tionship with God. Creation reflects the glory of God and it is an intercessor between humanity and the divine. This idea has been expressed by many writers like Gerard Manley Hopkins who observed how the 'essential whatness' (inscape) of creation leads to a realisation of the divine energy that sustains the inscape of all things (instress) and brings it alive to the senses and spirit of the observer.

One of the important ideas put forth by the eco-theologians is the notion that God is not only concerned about the salvation of people. Prime importance is given to the well-being of the land he has given them. The Bible cannot be thought of as a book describing a two way relationship between God and man, in which spirituality is given importance and the physical world is ignored. An appropriate understanding of the Bible reveals the truth that rests upon "seeing a three-way relationship. The three corners of the triangle are the creator, his people and the land he gave them as a covenant gift" (Elsdon, 95). Thus the spiritual themes of creation and redemption are given equal importance in Ecotheological hermeneutics by broadening perspective of nature in the theological thinking.

According to the theogonical narrative of the Bible, when Adam and Eve were created, they were vested with the prime responsibility of cultivating and keeping the garden. The Hebrew word which implies cultivation is *abad* which means "to serve" (the etymological root of 'conservation' can be traced back to this word) or in the literal sense "to be a slave to" and the root word for 'keeping' in Hebrew is *samar* which means that something entrusted in one's care is to be preserved, protected and maintained. It can be inferred that the genesis of theological discourse has strong implications of eco-consciousness.

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Faith invites humanity to be wise stewards of creation. The ownership of this earth by God and the position of man as a caretaker of creation can be inferred as the fundamental principle of stewardship. Thus humanity's special place in creation means a greater responsibility to make sure that God's intended purposes for creation are realised. The answers for sustainable development and environment crisis can be found in ecoethics of religions, which clearly state the rightful place and responsibility of man in the web of nature. Faith cannot be logically understood or rationalised. It is antithetical to the 'explainable', but it is an indispensable thread that weaves together the shreds of human life.

Terry Tempest Williams brings out the voice of indigenous communities in her works. The ecological wisdom of indigenous peoples including the Passamaquoddy/ Wabanaki Indians, various Sioux tribes, Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate tribe, Koyukon people and Hopis in works like *The Hour of the Land*, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, *Coyote's Canyon* and *An Unspoken Hunger*. The voice of religious ecology is a unified whole that brings out the truth that humanity should live in peace and harmony with the Earth and also with each other.

In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Williams writes about the variegated reflections on life and eco-spiritual reflections on many birds including Ravens, Pink Flamingos, Gray Jays and Meadow larks. The raucous behaviour of a flock of magpies that have descended on her weathered fence reminds her of all that she has left undone. This reflection leads her to think about the speech of her Kenyan friend Wangari Waigwa – Stone who belonged to the Kikuyu community. These people believed that one's closeness to the people is de-

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terminated by their closeness to the Earth. The nurturing of soil helps a woman feed her family and also nurture her relations and community resulting in a fertile ground of love and care, that will reach out to those in need. This aspect of the literature of Williams can be compared to the writings of Linda Hogan and her ecospiritual sensibility.

Linda Hogan in her “The Feathers” records a similar observation about nature in which she brings to fore the ecological voices of indigenous spirituality. In this work, she dwells upon the forgotten mystery of spirit and nature as she reflects on her Native American experience in the Chicksaw nation. In the dichotomy between rationality and the unexplainable, the latter is often debunked. The ecological renaissance in this post-modern era has paved the way for revisiting the roots of human civilization. Many writers and theoreticians including Terry Eagleton are making a gradual move towards the ‘other’ realm of physical world. In the chapter titled “Theory after ‘Theory’” in *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry observes a drift towards spirituality in “various aspects of reading, writing and textuality or as metonymic representations of a world more real than material reality” (Barry, 289). This volte-face fronting ethical and religious stances is blooming in the arena of literary and critical studies.

Rising interest in indigenous cultures is an emerging trend in ecocriticism. This notion is reflected in “The Feathers”, which is centred on the importance of feathers in Native American culture. It is interesting to observe how spirituality weaves the binary opposites- nature and culture. Linda Hogan writes about her quest for an eagle feather. “I wanted one from a bird still living. A killed eagle would offer me none of what I hoped

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for. A bird killed in the name of human power is in truth a loss of power from the world, not an addition to it” (Hogan 354).

Nature cannot be perceived as a colosseum to stage man’s might, nor can it be a backdrop where the drama of human life is enacted instead it is very much a part of human reality and ignoring the role of nature in culture can prove to be a threat to the web of creation. Hogan describes her first eagle feather that survived a burnt down house and smoking ruins which was given to her by a traditional healer and it was of her most prized possessions, treasured in a cedar box. Her experience of getting the next eagle feather on her own was a spiritual awakening. The significance of this seemingly simple feather is elevated to paramount importance by the author who calls this an event that rubs the other side of logic. A feather triggers her to think about the ‘other’ force at work, which is deeper than human knowledge and comprehension. A commonplace feather can provoke the spirit and aid in meditation leading to reflection and peace. Sadly man has forgotten this mystery and wisdom of nature treasured by the ancestors.

Linda Hogan recalls another experience where an eagle feather transports her to the mythical world. Throughout this account, the author tries to establish an inextricable link between her present life and the traditions of her ancestors. The interrelationship between the spiritual world and nature and how these two entities conflate to make man’s life meaningful is skilfully explored by the author.

Not everything under the sky can be understood and reasoned my human mind. The mystical and spiritual aspect of human reality cannot be eschewed. Tribal spirituality, as expressed by Linda Hogan makes nature sacred within the bound-



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aries of culture. This highlights the mutual interdependence and the web of relationships that exist between life forces. As nature is treated as a sacred space, the concern and responsibility towards it becomes an inevitable part of the human community. Moreover, spiritualisation of nature gives a voice the subaltern as it bespeaks their uniqueness and distinctive value in the global community which embraces cultural polyvalency. In a complicated lifestyle, it is crucial for man to pay attention to the gentle yet powerful mysteries of nature and spirit that teaches how to harmoniously blend culture and nature. This is a clarion call for a deep and truthful relationship with the Earth.

The term 'deep ecology' was coined by Arne Naess insisting on the deep spiritual relationship between man and nature that would result in sensitiveness and openness to natural life and interestingly this movement in environmental ethics is a conglomeration of various belief systems like Taoism, Buddhism, Native American Spirituality and Western philosophy. In the poem 'Finding the Space in the Heart', Snyder combines human reality with the reality of nature and a bifurcatory view between the two is eluded resulting in an increased sensibility towards nature. The spiritual and natural world is prioritised over the material world paving way for a biocentric consciousness of reality. Thus in the poetry of Gary Snyder, the value of the earth in deep ecology transforms into a spiritual realm emanating accord between social and natural realities. By infusing human identity into nature, humanity is invited to attain enlightenment by finding maturation and spiritual growth in nature.

An alienated understanding and construction of human identity is debunked in favour of the reconstruction of an iden-

tity that built on the foundations of the mystery of the earth and human soul. This restructuring of identities is vital to facilitate a shift in the way man relates to his oikos. The earth ethics of religions can expedite his change in human thinking and discourse as it forms a quintessential part in the 'collective unconscious' of the human race. Moreover the ecological ethics advocated by various religions throws light on the amicable blending of the dichotomies – culture and nature. A proper understanding and application of these ethics can result in sustainable development and interdependent existence between humanity and nature.

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