

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Modern Environmentalism in Alice Oswald's Poetry: An Ecocritical Reading of *Dart*

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ABSTRACT

The poetry of Alice Oswald, especially her *Dart* (2002) has greatly contributed to the modern literature of the British, particularly the way she managed to explore the nature and its environmental problems. The purpose of this paper is to discuss *Dart* in the ecocritical perspective, focusing on the ecological modernism of Oswald and its relevance to the overall ecological issues. Ecocriticism refers to a multidisciplinary theory applied to analyse the representation of nature across literature, the effect of environmental degradation on the human cultures and the reflection, critique and/or recommendation of the more harmonious relationship with the Earth in a literary work. In *Dart*, the connection between human beings and nature is that nature is not some external element not connected with human life, but rather a living being as portrayed by Oswald. The voice of the river itself is the voice of the agency of nature, which makes readers think about the impacts of the human activities on the nature and whether nature can influence human lives as a subject. With *Dart*, the poetry of Oswald is an ecological statement, a call to consciousness and the reminder of the need to be responsible to the planet.

Keywords: modern environmentalism, nature, ecocriticism, Alice Oswald, *Dart*.

مقالة بحثية

البيئة الحديثة في شعر أليس أوزوالد: قراءة بيئية في قصيدة دارت

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الملخص:

شعر أليس أوزوالد ، ولا سيما عملها دارت (2002) ، له مساهمة كبيرة في الأدب البريطاني المعاصر ، وتحديدًا في استكشاف العالم الطبيعي والمشاكل البيئية. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى استكشاف دارت من خلال عدسة بيئية ، مع التأكيد على حماية البيئة الحديثة لأوزوالد وكيف تتحدث عن الاهتمامات البيئية الأوسع. النقد البيئي هو إطار متعدد التخصصات يفحص تمثيل الطبيعة في الأدب ، وتأثير التدهور البيئي على الثقافات البشرية ، وكيف تعكس الأعمال الأدبية أو تنتقد أو تصف علاقة أكثر انسجامًا مع الأرض. في دارت ، يقدم أوزوالد العلاقة بين الإنسان وعالم الطبيعة ، ان الطبيعة ليس كشيء خارجي أو منفصل عن الوجود البشري بل تم تصويرها على أنها كيان حي. يعكس صوت النهر وكالة الطبيعة نفسها ، ويدعو القراء إلى النظر في آثار الأفعال البشرية على البيئة وإمكانية الطبيعة كموضوع قادر على التأثير على حياة الإنسان. من خلال دارت ، يصبح شعر أوزوالد بيانًا بيئيًا ، ودعوة إلى الوعي ، وتذكيرًا بمسؤوليتنا المشتركة تجاه الكوكب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البيئة الحديثة ، النقد البيئي ، الطبيعة ، أليس أوزوالد ، دارت.

1. Introduction

In Poetry of Alice Oswald has also contributed considerably to the modern British literature in recent years especially in its discussion of the natural world and environmental issues. One of her most praised works *Dart* offers a strong prism through which we could see a merge between poetry and ecological discourse. In a time when environmental degradation has become so high that it raised alarm, poets such as Oswald have been instrumental in influencing the mindset of people concerning the environment and the dire necessity to conserve it [4, p. 22].

This essay will seek to develop the ecocritical approach to *Dart* and focus specifically on Oswald and his ecological modernism as a way of addressing the environmental issues on a wider scale. The primary emphasis will be made on an innovative depiction of nature and human relations to the environment done by Oswald. The paper will also use the writings of other British contemporary poets who have expressed the same environmental issues as Oswald, including Seamus Heaney (*The Soil*), Ted Hughes (*Crow* (1970)), Carol Ann Duffy (*The World's Wife* (1999)), and *The Bees* (2011), to put the Oswald poetry in a more encompassing ecocritical context. In doing so, the paper shall identify the use of poetry in promoting environmental awareness and sustainability in the contemporary times.

2. Ecocriticism and the application to the contemporary poetry

The multidisciplinary approach of ecocriticism has been changing considerably in the last few decades. It has its original origins in literary theory, and has since extended into environmental studies, philosophy, and ethics, the manner in which literature engages with the natural environment. Ecocriticism, in its most basic form, involves the analysis of the way nature is portrayed in a work of literature, how the destruction of the environment affects human cultures, as well as how literary texts demonstrate, advise, or even project a more balanced relationship between humans and the Earth. Not only a theoretical method, ecocriticism involves the revaluation of the relationships between human beings with the environment and emphasizes the urgency of solving ecological problems [6, p. 5].

The contemporary ecocriticism has moved beyond the examination of the representation of nature in literature to address the environmental concerns that are becoming urgent now, including climate change, habitat loss, and annihilation of the biodiversity. The main objective of the ecocritical analysis is to pose the ethical question of the literature in order to play a part in environmental advocacy, awareness and challenge human behaviours that negatively affect the planet. The representation of these issues in the modern poem is a

perfect example of Alice Oswald's *Dart* (2002). Not only does her work give a reflection on the ecological problems but it also stands as a criticism on how societies today have ignored the natural world in order to engage in industrial and economic activities.

The individual treatment of the environment in *Dart* is a combination of closeness and openness by Oswald. Instead of depicting nature as an abstract or a far-off thing, Oswald invites the readers to a very personalised, very immersive experience with the River Dart in Devon in England. Oswald anthropomorphises the natural world by giving the river a voice, giving it a personality, a sentient and communicative one [1, p. 13].

Such an approach enables the river to narrate its own tale and to give an account of its history, the memories it keeps and the variety of lives it sustains. Oswald is able to bridge the human-nature divide, using this way of narration, and, as a result, nature is not merely a setting, a backdrop, but an entity, a living, breathing being, in which the human experience exists.

Oswald questions the popular view of nature as an external or independent thing in his depiction of the river as a living being. Rather, she introduces nature and humanity as something that cannot be separated. The flow of the river is not only a physical process of water flow; it is a representation of time, memory and the connectedness. Those that dwell on its rivers are not spectators of its flow but are stakeholders in its existence. Oswald unveils the connection between their stories, histories, their very ruin of the river, and its life. The poem uses the voice of the river to criticize the way humans deal with the environment, which can be described as exploitive and not keen on considering the outcome of the long-term effects [1, p. 15].

The characterization of the river by Oswald represents an ecocritical style that emphasizes the powers of nature as such. The river in *Dart* is not a simple object or resource that can be utilized by a human being. It speaks in its wishes, its sufferings and recollections. The agency of nature presented-in the poem encourages the reader to think not only about the impact human activities have on nature but also about the fact that nature can be a subject that can affect the lives of people. By doing so, the poetry by Oswald makes the old ecological tales difficult to follow through since nature is not a victim to be pined over but an entity that has power that needs to be respected.

Dart repeats the motif of the anthropogenic impact on the river. As the poem progresses, the river displays its scar, pollution, deforestation, and negligence by people who assumed the river to be an easy-going thing. However, Oswald never sinks into a naive attack on humanity. Rather, she gets the intricacy of human relationships with nature: individuals are both nurturers and predators, and they can do immense evil and immense good. An example of this is the voice of the river where it talks of the activity's of the humans engage in resentment and understanding of the human as an animal that, although blind to the harm they are inflicting, can also have moments of being in a great relationship with the physical world. Such subtle description is reminiscent to the present ecological crisis, which is not only the result of human

apathy but also an appeal to the change [5, pp. 6-7].

The *Dart* of Oswald reflects the spirit of ecocriticism and embraces literature as the means of not only showing the condition of natural world but also opposing the concept of our perception and relationship to it. Through personifying the river and making us realize the sheer interwoven nature of the human and environmental past, the poems of Oswald challenge us to rethink the limits between human existence and those ecosystems which we inhabit. In that light, *Dart* is not only a poetic illustration of a river, but a declaration of ecological statement, an appeal to awareness and part of the collective responsibility to the planet.

3. Environmentalism in Alice Oswald's *Dart*

“Whose voice is this who’s talking in my larynx” [12, p. 23]. Alice Oswald interlaces several points of view and combines the human, animal and environmental voices in *Dart* to produce a complex representation of the river. The river itself is metaphorical of not only the passage of water but also with passage of time, memory and even life itself. The structure of narrative that is innovative on the part of Oswald is what makes all aspects in the poem interrelated. The voices are individual voices, of the river, a fish, a fisherman, a passer-by, all the voices expressing different constituents of the life of the river and the wider ecosystem in which the river breathes life. The multi-faceted views are combined into a comprehensive view of the river and it is only through this that nature, just like the river, cannot be viewed in a vacuum. It is influenced by the past, human behaviour and ecosystems around it [5, p. 20].

Dart disinvests human and non-human by enquiring, Who is the one talking in my larynx? implicating that there is a voice other than the voice of the human speaker. This query regarding the concept of a definite, sole identity means that the river and the environment might talk through us. Oswald desires to capture the nature of the river, through the voices of people working and living along the river, hence use the voices to give voice to the river instead of giving it human qualities. Whose voice is this who is speaking in my larynx? asks, implying that this individual voice is not outside the sound of the river, but is a section of it. The loss or creation of self is addressed in the text whereby the identity of the speaker becomes less defined by the use of different voices. Although this may be disturbing, it is also a means of release of the self-resulting in a change to a new being. The basic subject of the poem is environmental connectedness, as it stresses the fact that human beings belong to this chain of life. The ambiguity and the difficulty of the question indicate the difficulty of actually capturing the voice of a river. This expression fundamentally encapsulates the creative attitude of language of Oswald, extreme understanding of the natural world, and exploration of the complex relationship among people and the natural world hence opening up most of the

key concerns of *Dart* [2, p. 16].

“I was pinioned by the pressure, the whole river-power of Dartmoor, / not even five men pulling on a rope could shift me” [12, p. 21]. Among the main themes appeared due to the depiction of the river by Oswald is the contrast between the human and natural control. The river is introduced all through *Dart* not as an object to be taken over, but as a strong force that should be learned and admired. The river cuts across various sceneries, ties the countryside to the city, the nature to the unnatural. It is an object beyond human struggle to categorise, and it cannot be characterised or managed easily. In this respect, the river becomes a metaphor of the strong natural world, but fragile, which is not determined by human contact and is affected by it.

The picture of the "river-power of Dartmoor" emphasizes the constraints of human ability against the force of nature. Apart from its physical characteristics, the river is a dynamic and strong force closely linked to the Dartmoor terrain. It is a significant entity deserving of respect, not just a tool for human use. The quotation emphasizes the natural world's autonomy since the river exists according to its terms under the control of its forces and rhythms. The area between human attempts to define or control nature and nature's fundamental freedom contains conflict between control and freedom. The speaker's incapacity to be moved captures the pointlessness of seeking to have complete influence over the natural world. The speaker is "pinioned," implying a point of contact whereby the river's great strength is perceived, hence hinting at weakness. This quotation helps Oswald to create his complicated picture of the river as a multifarious creature, both strong and delicate, lasting and always changing, formed by the surroundings [2, p. 6].

“You don’t know what goes into water. Tiny particles of acids and salts. / *Cryptosporidium* smaller than a fleck of talcum powder” [12, p. 30, the water abstractor’s voice]. By using the river’s water as a conduit for the stories of various characters, Oswald draws attention to the environmental and human consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation. The river brings the traces of the pollution, negligence and ruin. The most important here is a metaphor of the river as the storage of memories that represent the scars that human progress left on nature. It carries the burden of ecological past, the mistreatment and destruction caused on the land, and the remnants of the human intervention. Nevertheless, even with these human traces the river maintains some sense of agency and independence suggesting to the readers about the strength of the natural world overcoming ecological adversity [9, pp. 399-400].

The poem by Oswald highlights the hidden pollution of water systems, hence the impact of urbanization and industrialization. The river is seen as having an ecological legacy and is spotted with traces of pollution, carelessness and damage. As the poem highlights the human responsibility in the state of the river, it also brings out the abuses and harm caused to the land through the human activities. However, with these negative influences, the river still has a sense of agency and autonomy, which emphasizes the persistence of nature despite the environmental pressure, and

this makes nature, despite facing environmental stress, remain powerful. As a metaphor for the natural world, the river emphasizes both its capability to withstand and its fragility in response to human activity. This degree of complexity gives the poem's examination of the interaction between people and environment even more difficulty [10, para. 3].

“We depend on it for its soft water / because it runs over granite / whereas fishermen for what for leisure” [12, p. 25, *the wool mill worker's voice*]. In *Dart*, Oswald investigates the interaction between nature and human beings and demonstrates mutual dependence between human activity and the natural world. Livelihoods along the river are closely connected with its healthiness and well-being, however, these people do not usually consider the consequences of their activities. Oswald uses the voices of the local fishermen, tourists and the inhabitants to criticize how economic ambitions, social activities and human apathy have destroyed the ecosystem of the river. The fishermen, as an example, mourn about the decreasing number of fish, the direct result of the pollution and overfishing. The tourists in the process of enjoying the beauty of the river are unaware of what the river is going through. These are archetypal characters who personify the general humanistic inclination to disregard or deny the harm to the environment in search of immediate profit. [2, p. 19].

The voice of the wool mill worker emphasizes the close relationship between human lifestyles and activities since human business depends on the resources of the river. Suggesting different groups have different interactions with the river, the contrast between the wool mill workers reliant on it for industry and the fishermen use it for recreation, that creates a conflict in how humans can value and use it. Oswald argues that even apparently innocuous uses can have effects on the river's ecology depending on human activities motivated by economic requirements or leisure interests; therefore, lack of recognition of the influence of these activities emphasizes the main point: human inclination to ignore or minimize environmental effects. Oswald underlines the idea that human activities have negative consequences on the river by means of the voices of fishermen and visitors, therefore criticizing how economic aspirations, social practices, and human negligence have destroyed the ecosystem of the river.

“I let time go as slow as moss, I stand / and try to get the dragonflies to land / their gypsy-coloured engines on my hand” [12, p. 12, *the eel-watcher's voice*]. Oswald incorporates too into the poem the silences of contemplation, of taking time to listen to nature, as well as through the simple act of cleaning up a pollution can provide the means of finding a closer relationship to nature and appreciating it. One can make out a faint yet tremendous appeal to the call back to nature, to see it not as something to be dominated, but as something that can be kept close to the heart. The river in such instances functions as a teacher and a mirror and it is time that

people rethink their connection with the earth.

It emphasizes the environment, self-reflection and closeness with river. The pose of the eel-watcher is an invitation to allow natural cycles of the river in one to run rather than controlling it or getting exploitation. By attempting to get dragonflies to land on his hand, he attempts to wish to be connected closely to the natural world, almost physically. The quote also shows how beautiful and intricate the river ecosystem can be. It also shows another image of how people can be in correlation with the environment to mean that more peaceful relationship can be built through peaceful observation, perception and treatment. Being a teacher and a mirror at the same time, the river makes people more aware of their personalities and their positions in the nature. The quote concludes by advocating a reconnection with nature via offering a suggestion that by using these close relationships, individuals could pass beyond a reign of mastery over the need to value and respect [11, pp. 159-160].

“Dart Every year Throes a heart” [12, p. 19]. An important feature of *Dart* is that it describes the cries of the river as the manifestation of the misery of nature. With a tone of mourning or distress, the river makes the plea of the inability of humans to heed the ecological messages that the planet is sending. The river is not some passive thing; it is not merely an object of action; it is an object and thus a subject. It laments its suffering, its fatigue and agony about human activities. The picture of crying river serves as a warning to the human beings informing them of the environmental destruction. This part of the poem is squarely approaching the ecocritical problems of our era; the need to hear the warning signals of the ecological crisis, and to recognize the burning urgency of action to reach the alleviation of environmental harm [9, p. 212].

The fact that people tend to ignore these cries is a criticism of the way that the current society interacts with the environment with the focus that was given to human nature by Oswald. Her presentation of nature as something that should be respected and given attention to enforce a message of ecological responsibility. It is not just an ode to environmental loss, but it is also a call to action, to say that what is being cried by nature cannot be hidden without irreversible loss happening; one cannot continue to ignore the cry of nature. This struggle with the misery of the river is the echo of the larger ecological crisis in the whole world where the symptoms of environmental degradation have become more and more difficult to neglect. Oswald employs the views of the river, the population that depends on it in her work, and the aspects affected by its degradation to encourage the readers to reflect on the moral consequences of their actions and their disregard of the health of the planet [3, p. 109].

Perhaps there is an up current that no one knows about on down-flowing water [12, p. 14, *the salmon's perspective*]. The river is not a passive victim of the human activity; it is a strong and active creature which has its voice and presence. Such shift in attitude where nature is a subject of subjectivity and agency becomes critical point of the critique of environmentalism by Oswald. The poem is not merely the reflection of the situation of

the modern ecological crisis but also the artistic pictures of the great unity of all living creatures. By proposing nature as a powerful live, something manipulable and subject to action, Oswald makes us consider our attitude to nature and effects of our actions on it.

The act of nature and the complexity of nature is involved in the quote. It brings out in question human idea of the river as living and multifaceted by implying that the river is not moving in a manner that might not necessarily be on-point and/or make sense to the human mind. Other innuendos in the quote are different levels of complexity in the ecosystem of the river and the vast interconnectedness. It implies that we are not able to comprehend dimly the secret forces and relationships at work. The quote guides us in the virtues of humility since it tells us that we need to be more aware of the outcome of our actions and also to allow the possibility of not being knowledgeable. In addition to the ecological crisis being taken into consideration, the introduction of the river as an agency by Oswald makes us understand that we are part of an active and interdependent system. It will be through this knowledge that we will be able to appreciate the existing ecological catastrophes and nature.

4. Ecocritical views among the contemporary poets

In order to better understand the ecological themes of *Dart* by Alice Oswald, one must place her work in the context of modern-day poetry that also addresses the ecological issues. Relations between man and nature have always been disclosed by poets like Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes and Carol Ann Duffy, who search the questions of environmental destruction, ecology and human place in its protection or destruction. Their creation, as in the case of Oswald, highlights the wholeness of human life and the surrounding and nature, not as a background to the human life, but as a living and moving entity in the human life. [3, pp. 116-118].

The preoccupation with the nature and its role in sustaining life is very much at work in the work of Seamus Heaney (this, in particular, is the case with his poem *The Soil* (2001). Heaney refers to the earth in *The Soil* as a living breathing entity as an active, functioning component of the life/death/regeneration cycles. The world becomes one of the major figures of fertility, sustenance and interdependence. The significance of soil as an essential component of life by Heaney is an indication of the importance of nature in preservation of the life as raised by Oswald.

Likewise, the *Crow* by Ted Hughes (1970) brings a deep insight into the destructive attitude of man to nature. The crow in the Hughes poem is associated with death, destruction and chaos. However, it also represents survival and endurance against the odds. In *Crow*, Hughes explores the role played by human beings who are fuelled by violence and selfishness in the destruction of the natural world. The poem gives us a

world through the eyes of the crow and in which nature is both victim and observer of the self-destructive human tendencies. This duality echoes with the description of the river Dart by Oswald that, even after all human degradation, does not lose its agency and power. Both Hughes and Oswald rely on nature as a mirror of the complications of human life revealing the influence of our actions on the environment and consequently on ourselves [7, p. 5].

Carol Ann Duffy, a modern of Oswald, also deals with issues of the ecological in her poetry, although frequently she writes about the meeting of the natural and the human. Duffy employs the voice of nature in her books *The World Wife* (1999) and *The Bees* (2011) to comment on the problem of environmental destruction and human culpability. Duffy explores the death of bee populations, an important ecological problem, in *The Bees*, using myth and narrative to present it. Duffy criticises the effect of industrialisation and modernity on the ecosystems by giving voice to the bees and presenting them as victims of human carelessness. Her vision poetry adds to the one of Oswald by emphasizing the vulnerability of nature and the need to preserve the environment.

Andrew Motion is a further modern poet, who resides in the weakness of nature and power of man to ruin and conserve in his poems. Motion thinks of the circular relationship between humankind and the world, and the consequences of failing to uphold this delicate balance in such works as *The Cinder Path* (1993) or *Natural Causes* (1991). Much like Oswald, Motion also emphasizes on the need to have a deeper understanding of the natural world, and that the world should be respected and treated properly. His poetry is inclined to pay much attention to the echo of human activity in the environment, and it resonates better with the ecologic interests of Oswald in *Dart*.

The peculiar feature of this work of Oswald is her personal and focused attitude to a certain geographical and ecological location which is a River Dart. Where Heaney, Hughes, Duffy, and Motion believe in earning ecological issues in a broader context, Oswald employs one though a very critical natural aspect in a small context. Since Oswald employs the river Dart as a mouth piece, the river is not simply an embodiment of the natural world. The river is a living part of the story of the poem, and it gives its own opinion concerning the human activity, the degradation of the environment, and the forces of time and history. The voice of the river in *Dart* is not just an allegory of the sufferings of the nature, but it is the reminder of the power and strength of the natural world.

This localised ecology site specialisation allows Oswald to turn the River Dart into a geographical phenomenon much less than an ecological symbol of survival. The river not only tends to represent the specific environmental concerns of the Devon region, but it also leads to the implication of the ecological crisis in the world. *Dart* by Oswald in her well-known and autobiographical description of the river reverberates on universal themes of ecological destruction in addition to being represented as an autobiographical record of environmental survival, a message that is time and space-free. Trying to address this river directly, Oswald transfers to the larger problem of the world the necessity to save

separate ecosystems and to take care of the nature in all its manifestations.

This way renders the *Dart* environmentalism approach by Oswald more than what her contemporaries talked about the environment. Poets, such as Heaney, Hughes, Duffy and Motion, are interested in the bigger environmental issues whereas Oswald is interested in the River Dart, specifically. She creates a profound and multi-layered narrative that gives significance to the importance of local ecological systems in the global environmental discourse. *Dart* is not only a touching reflection on what the state of the environment is but also an appeal to love and care about the specific ecosystems on which we are feeding. Oswald contributes to the existing debate on the role of poetry in the issue of ecology and enhancing the sustainability of the future by her unique approach.

5. Conclusion

The work of *Dart* by Alice Oswald is a solid contribution to the contemporary environmental poetry, which offers an elaborate stance concerning the subject of the relations and impact of human beings on the nature surrounding them. This is ecocritical speaking by asking us to check a second look at how we engage our nature in the poems by Oswald and he indicates that we should be more attentive to the environment. Her writing provokes us to reform our perception and forget that the nature is something that exists outside of us but provide it with the insight of the fact that it is something that is even more closely connected with our existence.

The comparison between Oswald poetry and the poetry of her peers can help us in understanding the way in which the modern poets apply their art as a tool of reflection and commenting on the problems of the environment we face today. Through the climatic changes and even more so the degradation of the environment, poets like Oswald are essential in the era, and his concepts are worthwhile in exploring how literature can be helpful in the formation of a sustainable future.

Conflict of interest

Q4 The author is mentioned immediately below certifies that he has no involvement or affiliation in any organization with any financial or non financial interest. The author ensures that he has no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

Authors' contribution

Q5 Mustafa Arkan Khntel conceived and developed the research idea, designed the methodology using an ecocritical approach, conducted the textual analysis of Alice Oswald's *Dart*, wrote the original draft, and revised the manuscript to meet academic standards, overseeing the overall direction and coherence of the study.

Data availability

Q6 All data supporting this study are included in the article. Additional information is available from the corresponding author upon request.

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