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## **Is Covid-19 Nature's Revenge? A Contemporary Eco-critical Reading of S. T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.**

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### **Abstract**

Corona Virus menace is one of the hot concerns all over the world, where one is blaming another one for the current issue, but no one is sure about, who is responsible for creating such intimidations, and who is really victimized, nature herself or human being? The answer can be found in the poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* written by the English romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In the poem, the representation of the punishments of the mariner for killing the albatross and today's Coronavirus outbreak from the part of Mother Nature is no longer segregated phenomena because in both cases Nature is victimized, and when Nature creates the resistance, human being also becomes a victim of it. The current study scrutinizes the Covid-19 pandemic and Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) from an eco-critical viewpoint to reach a conclusion that the recent coronavirus pandemic is a consequence of humanity's disregard for and mistreatment of nature. Hence, the paper connects Coleridge's prophetic vision from the poem to understand Coronavirus pandemic and finally sets the messages towards redemption by applying qualitative and theoretical approaches on the CCCCCs (Covid-19, Crime, Consequence, Cure, Coleridge, and China) as the fundamental grounds.

**Key Words:** Covid-19, Albatross, Eco-critical, Coleridge, China

### **Introduction**

Written more than 200 years ago, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), today perhaps perceived as irrelevant. But, the truth of this poem is critically and significantly relevant to understand the contemporary coronavirus pandemic crisis. Following the rise of eco-critical studies in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century, the romantic era became a fertile ground of material for the eco-critical study of literature. The poems, letters, and essays of the main romantic poets- William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and William Blake have been much analyzed by the eco-critics over the years as the concept of nature and imagination are the main premises of the *Romantic Movement*, which is also one of the main focuses of eco-criticism. Although Romanticism has been discussed among many eco-critical scholars, S. T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has remained underrated.

The poem can be considered as prophetic, by which Coleridge achieves the duty of a Romantic poet as a prophet. Resulted from the industrial revolution and the enlightenment age of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the romantic poets were conscious of nature and perceived human's decayed engagement with nature; therefore, they were consistently passing ecological messages in their writings.

As Karl Kroeber (1994) in his book, *Ecological Literary Criticism* states, “the romantic premise that the imaginativeness essential to poetry is the primary human capability enabling us to interact responsibly with our environment” (21).

So, the over-rational present-day ecologists require a romantic poet’s observations of nature to deal with the pandemic crisis. So, to prove such an idea, Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) is explored shedding light on ecological prophecies and messages within the poem.

### **Problem Statement**

The researchers have been scrutinizing the Covid-19 in writings, especially, in *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* and analyzing the behaviors of the crews and the Albatross in the sea voyage. They have found some ideas and textual references regarding eco-critical theories, and started finding some more relevant articles to be clearer, but have not found more scholarly articles on Coleridge’s masterpiece. The majority of the articles are based on the other five romantics, where nature is being judged from a romantic perspective (Pantheism) rather than ecological impacts. The existing studies also are not related to the most important issue which is, nature never betrays with those who love it much. The research, definitely, would assist people to conceive and judge human’s treatment of nature and its consequences from ecological viewpoints rather than from just surface denotative meanings. However, the research would try to infuse the problematic gap between usual perspectives on natural elements, and the ecological view of the selected poem.

### **Literature Review**

Based on the criticism of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), varieties of books and critical essays have been collected for the study. Different books and critical writings are compiled by many resounding scholars from all over the world who are adroit in eco-critical theories and criticism. To progress with the study, Sonia (2016) has been brought to connect the paper where she says the pandemic as a “paradigm of invasion” or “microbial xenophobia”. Moreover, Pope Francis (2020) asserts in an interview with CNN that it is ‘Nature’s response’ which supported by Humphry (1996). Interestingly, David (2002), and Peter (1991), also see the treatment of nature as an ethical imperative. Furthermore, David Quaman (2020), also says that “we destroy nature,” while Eric from a sociological point of view concludes with the final statement that “we are now in the global pandemic after all.” Apart from this, Coleridge’s Letters (1802), Ezra (2020), and also some of the literary online websites, newspapers, and magazines like *The Economic Times* (2020), *The Stream* (2020) have been compiled to reach a fruitful consequence on the research. In short, they are brought as a fundamental based on this research to find out effective and prolific consequences.

### **Objectives of the Research**

The paper critically observes the reasons behind the eccentric decision of killing the Albatross for nothing which is the part of nature to some extent God. It also scrutinizes the other characters’ conversion from one state to another, especially, from ‘life in death’ situation to Edenic blessings, as well as, emphasizes the incident how saving a serpent from danger saves all of them from confirmed death. One of the major functions of dealing with this study and research is to prove the characters’ attitude towards nature as cruel, for what she takes retaliation by leading them towards ‘life in death’ condition. The core objective of conducting this research is to make the readers understand about the distinctions between savings and killing the instinct part of nature, and its annihilative, and blessings to other parts.

### **Research Methodology**

The study has used a qualitative and theoretical method to comment on data from different sources. Primary and secondary sources have been also used to support it. The researcher consulted some online sources like (Academia.edu, scholar.google.com) and the library of Eastern University, Jahangirnagar University as well as a personal library. The researcher also took help from teachers, friends at different universities who have assisted him to compile data on the particular topic that he has chosen to find out new consequences. However, the researcher has used some conceptual frameworks to reach the main idea of the paper as well as further studies.

## **The Rationale of the Research**

It is commonly believed by many critics that the Covid-19 pandemic is the consequence of a particular place like Wuhan in China, wherefrom it has emerged, while another group of people strongly believe that it happens only because of nature's exposition from suppression and persecution over it since a long time, they also believe that if we protect each part of nature like a tiny serpent from danger, then nature herself protects us from dangers like Covid-19. It is, therefore, my main concern to find out the real issues regarding the Covid-19 pandemic by referencing Coleridge's *The Rime of Ancient Mariner*, through applying contemporary eco-critical theories and criticism.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

The paper is dependent on printed books and journals available in my country. Few books are compiled from Amazon and few are downloaded from the internet. The paper cannot deeply consult Covid-19 pandemic and its connection to Coleridge's prophetic vision, because of the time restrictions and word limitations. Finally, the budget cannot fully cover the paper to move forward to collect data.

## **Discussions and Findings**

### **Who is Victimized, Nature, or Human Beings?**

The tale, we are telling about the recent Coronavirus pandemic casts us as the victim of nature. But actually, it's the other way around. The US President Donald Trump referred to the coronavirus as the "Chinese virus" and doing so, he is publicizing an image of the pandemic as a foreign invasion. He is not the only one. Although we are (hopefully) not saying this kind of racist term to refer to this virus, many of us have the idea that human being is attacked by aggressive foreign pathogens that come from wild animals, and they are just passive victims. But, what if the real story of this modern pandemic along with many earlier pandemics is not about how animals and their germs are invading our human world but about how we are invading theirs?

This was the argument of Sonia Shah, author of the 2017 book *Pandemic* says, "the paradigm of invasion" ... or "microbial xenophobia," (55) as she calls it — often fails to explain why a microbe that's existed for ages suddenly turns into a pandemic-causing pathogen. After studying several outbreaks ranging from cholera to the West Nile virus to Ebola, she has come to her conclusion that human activities play a huge role in spreading these kinds of diseases. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the iniquity that the mariner commits were his whimsical decision to shoot the albatross that was traveling on the ship above in the sky. "With my cross-bow/ I shot the Albatross". (Coleridge432). He showed no consideration of murdering an innocent animal of nature is an evil doing. The bird signified a good omen for the mariner and it was protecting the ship and guiding it for the crewmembers but soon it became a curse on everyone as the Mariner disrespected and disrupted nature by shooting the albatross down. So, it can be argued that the albatross was not just a seabird but also becomes the symbol of Nature. And there is a resemblance between the way mariner and human being disturbing the harmony of it.

In January 1996, a deadly virus, later named as Ebola which was then barely known by the humans unexpectedly overflowed out of the nearer forests in Mayibout, in a wave of the small pandemic. The disease killed 20 of 37 villagers who were reported to have been infected, including a list that had carried, skinned, chopped, or eaten a Chimpanzee from the forest. The villagers told the reporter of *The Guardian* how the small children had gone into the forests with dogs that had killed the Chimpanzee. They said that everyone who cooked or ate it got a terrible fever. Some died immediately, while others were taken to the hospital. Among the fortunate survivors like Nesto Bemastic later said that 'we use to love the forest now we fear it'. Therefore, it was widely thought that tropical forests and wild natural environments teeming with exotic wildlife that is a threat to the human being as it throws dangerous viruses and pathogens that lead to diseases in humans such as Ebola, HIV, Swine and avian flu and dengue. However, several researchers like Sonia Shah, today will agree on the argument that like the whimsical killing of the albatross by the mariner, human being by killing wild animals creates a disruption in the ecosystem and that is the reason of the new viruses and diseases such as COVID-19, the pandemic that emerged in December 2019 in a seafood market of Wuhan in China where wild animals were also being sold.

According to the researchers, the seafood or the “wet markets” of China were the likely sources of the pandemic like the Coronavirus pandemic. In those markets, live wild creatures of every variety are mixed together, tied or chained up; waiting for the customers to buy them, and those animals will be killed on the spot. So, it is one of the hotbeds where blood, germs, and viruses from different animals get mixed and cause pandemic as *Smithsonian Magazine* warned us three years ago that China could be the “ground zero” for “future pandemics” as it sarcastically say’s ‘ thanks to its treatment of animals’.

Therefore, it is nature, not us which has been the victim. We sinned the ancient mariner, against nature as David Quamen (2012), the author of *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Pandemic* recently wrote in the *New York Times*, “we cut the trees, we kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets we disrupt the ecosystem, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need new hosts often we are it” (6)

### **Coleridge’s Prophetic Vision and Corona Virus Pandemic**

The Albatross was symbolically represented as the spirit of nature that subsequently punished the Mariner and his crewmates. By killing the Albatross, the mariner committed the crime in three levels-against nature, humanity, and religion. The same thing is happening now! Consequently, the punishment for the sin against nature reached the mariner and his sailors. The breeze that was upon the ship when the Albatross flew along its side disappears because the bird that maintained the harmony of nature dies. “Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down, / ‘Twas sad as sad could be;/ And we did speak only to break/ The silence of the sea!” (Coleridge 433). The wind that was moving the ship is gone; it was the consequence of the Albatross being dead. “We stuck, nor breath nor motion;/ As idle as a painted ship/ Upon a painted ocean” (433). They were now going to suffer the consequence of their karma being stranded out at sea with the ocean, which appeared to never move. Due to the Corona Virus lockdown, the world is also stuck as the ancient mariner’s “painted ship”. Reports show that a third of the world population is currently on some form of Coronavirus lockdown, which means their movement is being actively restricted and controlled by their respective governments. As an example, the biggest lockdown is currently being enforced in India, where 1.3 billion people have been ordered to stay inside their homes. Consequently, this lockdown has also paralyzed commerce not only of India but the whole world and has put billions of people out of their work and left many families begging or starving. In one word, the human being has lost their freedom to move and ‘stranded’ because it has disrupted the harmony of nature by aimlessly killing wild animals and exploiting the resources of nature. And even if the lockdown ends, will it be able to return to its previous state is now the burning question!

Secondly, similar to the deaths of mariner’s 200 sailors as a punishment by nature to kill the Albatross, we as a human race are also losing thousands of people due to Coronavirus infection. All the fellow sailors who were also indirectly parts of the Mariner’s iniquity in supporting his crime suffered too. They all had to pay for their sin of initially supporting the mariner for killing the bird. They could not get any water to drink and could not speak at all. Soon all his fellow sailors die leaving the mariner alone after encountering the specter woman and her dead companion. “The Souls did from thin bodies fly - They fled to bliss or woe! And every soul, it passed me by Like the whizz of my crossbow!”(434).With the death of his fellow sailors, the Mariner is reminded of his crime of killing the innocent bird. His suffering increases in the fourth part of the poem where he finds himself alone surrounded by the dead bodies of his fellow sailors. “Alonealone, all alone, Alone on a wide, wide sea! And never a saint took pity on. My soul in agony.”(435). Today the rapid implementation of social distance even maintains distance from our relatives, parents, and children creating the same loneliness that is depicted in the poem. As Eric Klinenberg, a New York University sociologistexplains that we are now officially in a pandemic but we’ve also entered a new period of social pain. There’s going to be a level of social suffering related to isolation and the cost of social distancing that very few people are discussing yet.

Despite social isolation, the distance between religion and humanity is also increasing as a consequence of the pandemic. In the poem, the crime mariner has committed also leads to his crew placing the Albatross around his neck to hang as a reminder to his wrongdoing. “Ah, well a day! What evil looks/ Had I from old and young! / Instead of the cross, the Albatross/ About my neck was hung” (435).

Later at the end of the poem, for seven days and seven nights when he is forced to spend time alone, reflecting on the past events which occurred during his sea journey, the eyes of the dead sailors fixed permanently on him blaming him for the consequences that his crime brought. It is only after this that he finally starts understanding and accepting his sin.

Then he repents intensely and tries to pray but he realizes that he is not able to do so. "I look'd to heaven, and tried to pray; But or ever a prayer had gush't, A wicked whisper came and made My heart as dry as dust"(36). Similarly, humanity is also unable to find solace in religious places as religious gatherings have proven to be the breeding ground for outbreaks. For instance, half of South Korea's cases were followed by a meeting of the Shincheonji church of Jesus. In Malaysia, thousands of people who visited a mosque contracted the virus. Moreover, many religious authorities closing important religious places, for example, Saudi Arabia banned foreign arrivals and closed visits to Mecca and Medina for *Umrah* which is the most important religious pilgrimage that Muslims can undertake at any time of the year. Many mosques around the world call to prayer but also advise people to pray at home.

Therefore, as Pope Francis has said in a recent interview to a British journalist of *The Tablet and Commonwealth* magazine which was broadcasted on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April in 2020 that Coronavirus is one of "nature's responses" (7) to humans ignoring the current ecological crisis, Coleridge prophetically gave the same message of nature through this poem. Similar to the ancient Mariner's punishment, today human being is also suffering in three levels - human life is being stopped, everyone feeling the extreme isolation due to social distancing and people are unable to find solace in religious practices.

### **Coleridge's Message towards Cure/Redemption**

The objective of this paper is not seeing Coronavirus as Hindu Mahasabha, one of the oldest political organizations of India sees as an "avatar" to punish non-vegetarians. And it is not proposed that the Chinese Premier Xi Jinping should 'create a statue of Corona and seek forgiveness' and all non-vegetarian people 'pledge of not harming any innocent creatures in future'. Rather, I want to go with Coleridge's message that human being is not separated from nature, therefore, to live a harmonious life they should make a deeper relationship with it.

As we find in the poem, the Mariner is not able to sleep out of his sense of guilt. He spends lonely days on the sea but his loneliness no longer remains as a punishment for him, rather it turns into an opportunity for him to understand the beauty and harmony of Nature. Suddenly, he sees water snakes and love rises in his heart for their beauty and their happiness. The snakes are no longer ugly creatures to be condemned or killed but are creatures to be loved and appreciated and he realizes that they are equally morally considerable. This new insight releases him from previous crimes, and he is able to bless the water snakes. The emotional dryness which was there in killing the Albatross goes away and now he can appreciate this water - snake's beauty. "O happy living things! No tongue Their beauty might declare: A spring of love gush'd from my heart, And I bless'd them unaware: Sure my kind saint took pity on me, And in bless'd them unaware" (Coleridge 436). The mariner's act of blessing the snakes was his first step towards redemption. As soon as he blessed the water - snake as if granting his remorse, the Albatross is removed from his neck and thus he is able to pray and confess his sin. "The selfsame moment I could pray; And from my neck so free, The Albatross fell off and sank Like, lead into the sea." (Coleridge 434). Therefore, the Mariner had become a preacher and spread his wisdom to the people he came across with the story of him killing the Albatross. He gave the message to respect all creations and not disturbing the harmony of nature by killing its creatures. As he concludes, "He prayeth best who loveth best All things, both great and small: For the dear God who loveth us, He made and loveth all"(437). But what brought such a drastic change in Mariner's attitude? Three possibilities might work behind his change in perspective towards nature. Those probable reasons are theological, philosophical, or ethical. As David Parkins has discussed, the ethical consideration of animals was closely linked with the inculcation of Christian morals. (Parkins 2002), Parkins concludes that "clearly, the moral of Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'(1798) was not unusual in its time" (144) the moral echoes the theology of Augustine in *Confessions*, which Coleridge very likely intentionally referring in the poem. In *Confessions*, Augustine says "Hence I saw and it was made clear to me that you made all things good, and there are absolutely no substances which you did not make. As you did not make all things equal, all things are good in the sense that taken individually they are good, and all things taken together are very good. For our, God has made all things very good" (Gen. 1:31 Confession 125).

In other words, it had to be 'displeased with' any of God's creatures, even the lowest of creatures like snake or worms. Although Bible snakes are portrayed as evil, Augustine depicted all creation as 'good' as all creation was made by God.

Moreover, in a letter to William Sotheby, Coleridge says that "everything has a life of its own, and that we are all *One Life*." (Sotheby 9) As a romantic poet, Coleridge believed that everyone and everything in this universe is somehow connected with each other. We are all part of this ancient unity that binds us together. In this unity, all our superficial differences are being erased and in which there is complete equality among man, beast, and all non-animate things of this universe. Humphry House (1966), comments on Coleridge's *Unitarianism* and says that water-snakes in the poem "stand for all 'happy living things'" (282), and that the "first phase of redemption, the recovery of love and the recovery of the power to prayer, depends on the recognition of [the Mariner's] kinship [...] with other natural characters" (290). However, despite the theological and Coleridge's romantic sentiments regarding the moral considerations

Thinking about non-humans we might notice new reasons for formal considerations: for example, non-humans might have aesthetic properties such as beauty, which we might think make them morally considerable. This, too, is a case where they are morally considerable not because they have interests but because they possess some property that gives them intrinsic value. (Peter 290)

In terms of the wildlife protections, modern ethics also support the same argument which is, we should not destroy nature or wild creatures as it possesses 'beauty'. As Robert Elliot writes, so the mariner's act of blessing the snakes was his first step towards redemption. As soon as he blessed the water - snakes as if granting his remorse, the Albatross was removed from his neck, and thus he can pray and confess his sin. But his journey continues to inform others as we find in the beginning he is telling his story to the 'wedding guest'. Similarly, the isolation period of quarantine as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic is a time for us to rethink our attitudes towards nature. If we want to justify our living on this planet, on a personal level, we have to be more kind towards wildlife creatures and ecological conditions. Then we need to create awareness among the people of all spheres as the ancient mariner tells his story to the wedding guest. Literally, we should spread the message of treating nature as morally as possible to the hunters, loggers, market traders, and consumers of wild animals and the environment. And last but not the least, every nation in the world should institute a new policy of 'peaceful coexistence' with *Gaya (Mother Nature)*. This policy would legitimize the continued presence of humans on this planet but require that they respect and appreciate certain limits in their actions with their ecosphere.

## Conclusion

The genius of S.T. Coleridge, his powerful poetry, and his prophetic visions of nature made him a major figure in English Literature. A contemporary eco-critical reading of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* confirms its immortality and continuing relevance in this day and age. When humanity is at risk of extinction as infectious diseases such as Ebola, Sars, bird flu, and now Covid-19, caused by a novel coronavirus, are on the rise, it is his poem that indicates what needs to be changed to survive peacefully on this planet. The poem depicted a journey of an individual's relationship with nature; a journey in which the individual begins in ignorance of being a part of nature, and ends with awareness: "He prayeth best, who loveth best/ All things both great and small" (Coleridge 437). The Mariner, at first, perceives nature with his five senses. His perception of nature is so disrespectful that he did not care for killing an innocent Albatross. This created a complete separation between him and nature, and through his punishments, the poem showed the misery of contemporary humanity which is not in harmony with nature. But the poet is not pessimistic though, he has also shown the way, the way to commiserate with nature and being able to see the beauty of it.

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