**CHAPTER-3: ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE**

***Discourse, Environmental Discourse, Discourse Analysis, Typology of Environmental Discourse***

**3.1. Discourse, Environmental Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

What do we mean by discourse? Oxford ALD defines it as “a long and serious treatment or discussion of a subject in speech or writing”; “The use of language in speech and writing in order to produce meaning”. Therefore, it can be conceptualized as a formal and intense discussion or debate about a given issue where there is an orderly exchange of ideas between the parties. Or, put more succinctly, discourse is an interrelated set of ‘story-lines’ which interprets the world around us and which becomes deeply embedded in societal institutions, agendas and knowledge claims. These story-lines have a triple mission: to create meaning and validate action, to mobilize action, and to define alternatives. Discourse is the most general category of linguistic production and subsumes a number of other tactics and devices including narrative (the writing and telling of stories) and rhetoric.

Within environmental studies, discourse has been visualized in a variety of ways, rangingfrom a ‘story-line’ that provides a signpost for action within institutional practices (Hajer1995) to a social movement ‘frame’ that enables the practices of environmental movementorganizations (Brulle 2000), to an environmental ‘rhetoric’ constructed around words,images, concepts and practices.

What is discourse analysis? It is a method for analyzing the production, reception and strategic deployment of environmental texts, images and ideas. In recent years, discourse analysis has emerged as an increasingly influential method of doing so. Although closely identified with social Constructionism, nonetheless, discourse analysis has been practiced with good results by subscribers to other ‘schools’ of environmental theory and research, most notably, critical theorists, political ecologists and international policy analysts.

**3.2. Typology of Environmental Discourse**

One basic attempt to organize the analysis of environmental discourse comes fromHerndl and Brown (1996). Their ‘ rhetorical model for environmental discourse’ takes theshape of three circles, each of which is located at the tips of a triangle. At the top of thetriangle is what they call *regulatory discourse* – disseminated by powerful institutions thatmake decisions and set environmental policy. Nature here is treated as a resource. Atbottom right of the triangle is the *scientific discourse* where nature is regarded as an object ofknowledge constructed via the scientific method. Policy-makers routinely ground theirdecisions here, relying in particular on technical data and expert testimony. Finally,directly opposite this on the bottom left is *poetic discourse* that is based on narratives ofnature that emphasizes its beauty, spirituality and emotional power. Nature writing is oneexample of this. Herndl and Brown stress that these three powerful environmentaldiscourses are not mutually exclusive or pure, however, and often end up being mixedtogether. In such cases, what we best look for are ‘dominant tendencies’.

Another effort directed at the classification of environmental discourses is Brulle’s (2000) typology of discursive frames adopted by the US environmental movement. Drawing on the environmental philosophy literature and on his detailed reading of the history of American environmentalism, Brulle came up with nine distinct discourses: manifest destiny (exploitation and development of natural resources gives the environment value that it otherwise lacks); wildlife management (the scientific management of ecosystems can ensure stable populations of wildlife remain available for leisure pursuits such as sport hunting); conservation (natural resources should be technically managed from a utilitarian perspective); preservation (wilderness and wildlife must be protected from human incursion because they have inherent spiritual and aesthetic value); reform environmentalism (ecosystems must be protected for human health reasons); deep ecology (the diversity of life on earth must be maintained because it has intrinsic value); environmental justice (ecological problems reflect and are the product of fundamental social inequalities ); ecofeminism (ecosystem abuse mirrors male domination and insensitivity to nature’s rhythms); and ecotheology (humans have an obligation to preserve and protect nature since it is divinely created). Brulle argues that this multiplicity of discourses has resulted in the fragmentation of the US environmental movement, preventing it from speaking with a single, unified voice to a wise national audience. Adherents of each discursive frame talk past each other ‘in a process of mutual incomprehension and suspicion’. As do Schnaiberg and his entourage (see Chapter 2), Brulle concludes that there can be no meaningful environmental action without real structural change. This is unlikely to occur as long as discourses about the environment continue to block or mask the social origins of ecological degradation and proclaim a coherent vision of the common environmental good.

There are also some other efforts directed at classifying environmental discourse such as Dryzek’s (2005) four main discourses. However, in this section we will only emphasize the three environmental discourses of Hanningan (2006) namely: Arcadian, Ecological, and Environmental Justice. In common with Herndl and Brown’s model, a distinguishing characteristic is the predominant ‘motive’ or ‘justification’ for the environmental action.

***Table 1 Typology of Key environmental discourses in the 20th century***

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Discourses** | | |
| *Arcadian* | *Ecosystem* | *Environmental Justice* |
| *Rationale for defence of environment* | Nature has priceless aesthetic and spiritual value | Human interference in biotic communities upsets the balance of  Nature | All citizens have a basic  right to live and work in a  healthy environment |
| *Iconic books* | *My First Summer in the Sierra* | *Silent Spring*  *A Sand County Almanac* | *Dumping in Dixie* |
| *Primary nesting place* | Back to nature movement in early 20th C America | Biological science | Black churches |
| *Key alliance/fusion* | Preservationists and conservationists | Ecology and ethics | Civil rights and grassroots  Environmentalism |

* + 1. **Arcadian Discourse**

*Wilderness as a discursive invention: the ‘Back to Nature’ movement in early twentieth-century America*

As Europe and America became increasingly urbanized at the close of the nineteenth century, views towards nature began to undergo a major transformation. In particular, the concept of ‘wild nature’ as a threat to human settlement which had long predominated gave way to a new, intensely romantic depiction in which the wilderness experience was celebrated. By the last part of the nineteenth century, wilderness was now seen as a precious resource rather than a threat. This view was especially strong in the United States where the frontier was on the verge of closing. In the Eastern portions of the country, natural landscapes were rapidly disappearing as urban growth proceeded. Urban expansion, in turn, seemed to produce a surfeit of noise, pollution, overcrowding and social problems. In this context, unspoiled natural settings took on a special meaning; that is, the stress of city living created a rising tide of nostalgia among the urban middle classes for the joys of country life and outdoor living.

Schmitt (1990) has identified a ‘back to nature’ movement that flourished in the United States from the turn of the century to shortly after the First World War. This movement (Nash 1967) encompassed a wide range of activities including summer camps, wilderness novels, country clubs, wildlife photography, dude ranches, landscaped public parks and the Boy Scouts. While it was not the only factor, this nature-loving sentiment played a significant role in the creation of the natural parks system. In the process, wild nature was transformed from a nuisance to a sacred value.

* + 1. **Ecosystem discourse**

A second major discourse that has powerfully shaped how we regard nature and the environment is that centering on the notions of ‘ecology’ and the ‘ecosystem’. Referring to Herndl and Brown’s (1996) terminology, we could say that the dominant tendency here is ‘scientific discourse’.

* + 1. ***Environmental justice discourse***

In the 1980s, a new set of ‘discursive formations’ emerged in the United States that differeddramatically from prevailing ones in their interpretation of environmental problems andpriorities. Environmental justice thought, Dorceta Taylor (2000: 508, 566) observes, hasemerged as a major part of the environmental discourse; in the short time it has been around it has ‘altered the nature of environmental discourse and poses a challenge to the hegemony of the NEP’.

Environmental justice lays out a set of claims concerning toxic contamination in terms of the ‘civil rights’ of those affected rather than in terms of the ‘rights of nature’ (Nash 1989). Capek (1993) identifies four major components of this environmental justice frame: the right to obtain information about one’s situation; the right to a serious hearing when contamination claims are raised; the right to compensation from those who have polluted a particular neighborhood; and the right of democratic participation in deciding the future of the contaminated community. Each of these components represents a specific claim that has been rhetorically formatted in the language of ‘entitlement’ (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993).

Whereas the concept of ecology was utilized in the 1970s to join together rising concerns about toxic pollution with an ethical concern for nature, environmentalism in the 1980s and 1990s underwent another transformation in which the central discourse is ‘environmental justice’. This shift occurred primarily at the grassroots level both domestically and in the Third World. While some key figures in this movement have wanted to throw off the environmental label entirely, others have framed their claims to justice and equity within the context of an environmental movement. Though the environmental justice activists have not totally abandoned the legacy of the previous two decades, concerns about resource conservation, wilderness preservation and pollution abatement are de-emphasized in favour of issues such as the uneven distribution of resources and development and the safety of minority workers.