



Awakening The Young Mind Through Children's Literature: Ecocritical Perspectives

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the norm of cultivating the young mind. It is a proven fact that brain development of young ones is greatly affected by early education. Early education helps children to gain the social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. This is foundational and becomes the cornerstone for later education. The importance of early childhood education helps to develop a 'lifelong love of learning' in children.

Researchers claim it is imperative that core values and skills be developed in the early years of a child. What better time to begin the study of the child's surroundings? Love for the environment has to be generated in the early life of a child. Inadequate environmental education results in an unconsciousness attitude to the dangers of environmental problems. As educational syllabus becomes tedious, environmental consciousness and ethics can be introduced through captivating literature. What steps can we take to awaken the young mind towards protecting the world environment?

This paper proves how generating love for the environment in the malleable mind of children makes a monumental difference towards environmental consciousness. This paper examines the importance of a non-formal environmental education. It studies how consciousness, created through literature, goes a longer way in saving the Earth.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, ecology, environs, consciousness

Text

The water in the sky. The water in the rivers and water in wells, whose source is ocean may all these sacred waters, protect me.

Hindu Puranas

As the human population goes on exploding and ruling the world, the space for other species goes on decreasing at an alarming speed. Man and his increasing brood need to survive. 5200 million plus inhabitants' survival depends on the Earth's resources. As man's dominion over the universe increases, nature keeps receding. Survival of the fittest is the norm, but Man's victory is short lived. He will survive but that life span

is limited. Man's survival is co-existent with the nature's physical features and trillion other organic species. It is in this precept that the cycle of life is established. From a wandering nomad dependent on Nature and worshipping Nature, there has been a shift wherein Man has become a menace destroying Nature. What has caused this eventuality? Science? Greed? Insecurity?

Philosophy of Survival

Man is but one of the million species on Earth but he is the overall master of the universe. Each species is intended to lead their life and contribute to the cycle of life. Every specie has its importance and a particular niche in the biosphere. Each specie needs the other and cannot continue to survive, in this complex biotic, in the absence of the other. This is the fundamental rule of living which Man in his striving for technological comforts continue to overlook.

It does not need a highly intellectual individual to see the fragile but fundamental dependency of each faculty on the other. No human cell can survive independently outside the life of the human. They depend on the other billion cells for survival. On a larger scale we see the interconnectivity of humans to the universe. The Earth is a living entity with all its living organisms. Every living specie has a specific function that contributes to the working of the larger harmony of the biome. The inter-relation between the natural forces and living species is meant for the working of the bio-geo system.

Man's culture and tradition originates from the environment he survives in. His food is based on the vegetation and animals around him. His occupation is also governed from his habitat. It cannot be denied that the existence of Man and his culture is a product of his environment. Hence, we have the culture of the torrid zones different to those of the desert or tropical zones. From the climatic and ecosystem available, Man's values and belief system has originated. All religions have their beliefs in Nature and the environment.

The balancing act between Science and Nature is like that of a seesaw. Science and Nature are the two opposite ends. As science progresses and man's dependence of it increases, the other end which is Man's dependence on Nature, decreases. Man has blindly used his knowledge and technology to satiate his economic greed. It is this greed which has caused an imbalance in Nature. The unchecked exploitation of resources, living and non-living, has created loss of biodiversity. It is the misconception of progress at the cost of Nature that has created environmental destruction. Now governments have to introduce policies to re-do this damage and check further damage.

Eco-criticism, Nature writing, Environmental studies etcetera all aim at reworking the balance between Nature and Man. Education can create awareness and environmental activism. "Any course of development today requires the guidance of an environment specialist. Environmental Studies has become an important part of urban planning including the construction of houses, sanitation, water management and waste disposal." (4 Dawan)

Environmental Consciousness and Education

Ninety percent of protecting the Earth is completed if we create this consciousness in children. We did not inherit the Earth from our parents but rather we have borrowed from our future generations (Johnson and Brusca, 1994). In order to discontinue the degradation of the Earth, we need to create an environmental consciousness in individuals. Environmental consciousness creates awareness of the Earth as a heritage, which is depleting, due to Man's carelessness. Individuals need to be trained to understand the challenges caused due to global warming, rise in water levels, ozone depletion etcetera.

The western countries began propagating Environmental consciousness in the mid-nineteenth century. This is the reason they hate it if a tree is cut or plants removed. A fire makes them livid. An environmental conscious person is intolerant towards nature abuse. This is because an awareness has been created for them some 30 years ago. These scenes of nature destruction are a crime. Environmentalist take care to maintain the equilibrium of the environment. Awareness to this regard has to be created in our own society, and with an immediateness, in order to counter the damage done and salvage the Earth.

Progress and industrialization does not need to harm the Earth. The most technologically developed countries have accepted this truth and have inculcated this dogma decades ago in their syllabi. But the damage will continue until all nations work together towards this universal objective.

"Undoubtedly there is a role for the school curriculum in making people aware, but it has to go well beyond that...." (427 Shrivastava) What is meant by going beyond that? It means sowing the seeds of consciousness in the minds of children from an early age. Education of environmental issues should commence as early as possible. It begins with tutoring the minds of little children beyond the school curriculum. It can begin through children's literature. All children love to hear stories. Bedtime stories are a bonding force between parents and children. These bedtime stories can be a great stimulant for treating environmental consciousness.

Education through Literature

Understanding the history of Man's evolution and survival goes hand in hand with man's complex relationship with nature. The environmental degradation caused by Man has raised innumerable concerns. The irreparable damage caused by Man has created the urgent need to understand nature through the social sciences and humanities. In ancient times, Man was exposed to environment from the day of his birth. Unlike primitive man who lived exposed to the environment, today children live protected in comfortable environment. But, as they grow they are exposed to Nature and begin to understand the natural environs. Children have to be taught not to kill bees or butterflies, break trees or flowers, not harm birds etcetera. The beauty of the environment and nature has to be emphasized to children as they grow.

All societies need education to influence children and students on the positive and creative energies on nature. The elders in the family play an important role in creating the first awareness for a child. The beauty of a night sky, gardens, beaches, mountain trips can be utilized to emphasize the beauty of nature. Later the school and society have to continue this environmental education.

Literature is a primary medium which has been able to mirror the relationship between Man and environment across different societies and cultures. In expounding contemporary issues of the protagonist, the need for a positive relationship between man and environment is comprehensively highlighted. Through Literature, writers draw attention to the environmental concerns and the ability to build an ethical perspective towards nature.

Natural Imagery

Literature is not created in a vacuum. Rather, the descriptive prowess of writers to bring to life the ecology and habitat of a particular community. Writers, especially novelists, are able to portray the natural environs and Man's existence in it. Literature is incomplete if the natural imagery is absent. Through the natural imagery nature in its various forms is described, like: sublime, picturesque, beautiful, peaceful, tumultuous etcetera. Literature and language have an obligation to contribute in transmitting morals and ethics with serious environmental and ecological implications.

For Children's Literature, natural imagery is absolutely necessary. As a child grows, his skills for imagination and curiosity develop. Illustrations in books are stepping stones to develop the toddler's mind. Toddlers are fascinated with pictures. An entire story consists only of illustrations. The word Illustration is taken from the Latin word *Illustrationem*, which means "vivid representation." Illustrators concerned with the environmental hazards take great care to show readers the truths and give a concise understanding of the world.

This is the reason young children's curiosity can be kindled. Children, who are about to start learning and reading, will absorb the right attitude. The literature for children is replete with fascinating images in eye catching colours. Illustrations are meant to illustrate or highlight a particular point. The main purpose of illustration is to get a message across to the readers or viewers. The illustrations elaborately highlight the meaning of the text and for adults they highlight special features. Illustrations are capable of transforming a simple story into an exciting and fascinating one. Authors and publication houses are very particular and spend a lot of money to ensure that children's books have meaningful imagery.

For environmental consciousness, Illustration consisting of the natural imagery in vivid colours are an important part of children's literature. It is through the images that the children conceive the natural world around them. Consciousness of distant regions, continents away, become a close reality. They are able to perceive the natural habitats and species of different regions. Images help the children to understand and identify different species, climatic zones, climatic hazards of distant lands.

Important Environmental Novels for Children

The Lorax is a children's book written by the famous children's author Dr. Seuss and published in 1971. It artistically chronicles the plight of the environment and the Lorax. The Lorax is the titular character, who "speaks for the trees" and confronts the Once-ler, a business magnate. It is Once-ler who is the cause of environmental destruction.

The Lorax, through its whimsical characters and wonderful, Seussical wordplay is able to create a connect with children. The cautionary message of the book reminds children of the danger of environmental abuse. The lesson children learn is that respect for the environment and all living creatures will help us preserve the planet for ourselves and future generations. The book in easy language introduces the child of the evils of capitalism. Nature like the chopped trees are defenceless in the hands of business tycoons.

Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain* is an thrilling fantasy for children. Sam Gribley escapes to the Catskills with his pet falcon and weasel. With his grit and courage, he supports himself and his pet. This work infuses a love for animals and admiration of nature.

Affection and respect for nature have to be inculcated in the young mind. Children possess an all-embracing attitude. Animals are not creatures to be wary of but rather befriended. The *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel is an important script that emphasizes the coexistence of man and animal. From this work Children can understand the psychology that governs the existence of animals. Caged animals are alone and deprived of their natural habitat. It is only in self-defense that animals turn ferocious. This movie brings about a consciousness towards the mute animal. The display of ferocity, of savage courage, made the protagonist Pi realize that he was wrong. Pi registers his surprise at discovering a new facet to an animal he thought he knew.

The story again emphasizes the importance of early education in bringing about consciousness towards the animals and plants around us.

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder was published in 2005. As late as the 21st century, this book authored by Richard Louv deals with the unfortunate decreased exposure of children to nature in American society. Louv's environmental foresight was appreciated. He received the Audubon Medal "for sounding the alarm about the health and societal costs of children's isolation from the natural world—and for sparking a growing movement to remedy the problem." Louv's work is a warning to governments and educationist on the importance of saving the Earth for the future generations.

Nature-deficit Disorder

The twenty first century witnessed a monumental rise in per capita income. Materialism and excesses have replaced values and simple living. It resulted in parents indulging the child with every comfort and luxury. The outcome was that children spent more time indoors with their gadgets. Pre-occupied with their fascination for technology, resulted in ignorance and uninterest in their environs.

Strangers to the environment make children afraid of the outdoors. The Nature-deficit disorder does not allow the natural growth of a child. Again, this can be eliminated by environmental literature.

Conclusion

In a society where man interaction with nature is on the decline, literature is the easiest way to bring to children an appreciation of Nature. Appreciation of Nature only can create Environmental consciousness. Environmental Consciousness through literature at an early age is the answer to the "Nature-deficit disorder" of mankind.

Let me conclude with Joseph Meeker's statement, "Joseph Meeker, in his seminal work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974), affirms that as the world's only literary creatures, human beings have the responsibility to discover the role of literature in the welfare and survival of humanity and the natural environment as well as to examine the 'insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. (7 Rangarajan)

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