



# Dhan Gopal Mukerji's Books for Children: A Window into Eastern Harmony with Nature and Spiritual Consciousness

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**Abstract**— Divulging a strong undercurrent of environmental ethics, the animal stories of Dhan Gopal Mukerji serve as the early source for ecological awareness. Dhan Gopal Mukerji was an early twentieth century Indian-American writer often remembered for his contribution to children's literature. His works build a cultural bridge between the East and West. Mukerji's childhood experiences in the wilderness of Indian jungle subtly influence his narratives which are derived from the Vedantic perspectives of ahimsa (non-violence) and interconnectedness among all forms of life. Mirroring deep ecology, his philosophy sees humans as part of a larger web of life and not as superior to it. Mukerji's portrayal of animals and nature align with eco-centric environmental concerns where all living beings are considered valuable in themselves, not just in relation to human use. Mukerji's works highlight the trauma faced by animals due to human conflicts criticising anthropocentrism. Though Mukerji may not be explicitly categorised as an environmental activist but a close reading of his works reveals how living in harmony with nature was a major concern in his writings dedicated to children. He undoubtedly was the pioneer of nature writing even before the genre became popular.

**Index Terms**— Eco-literature, Animal empathy, Harmony, Eastern philosophy, Coexistence, Environmental ethics, Spiritual Oneness

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has long played a crucial role in shaping human perspectives on the environment. Through different literary genres such as storytelling, poetry, essays and fiction writers have influenced how people understand nature, wildlife and their responsibility towards the planet Earth. Environmental literature helps raise awareness, inspire conservation efforts and critique human actions that harm the natural world. Many literary works depict the beauty of nature and the consequences of environmental degradation. By immersing readers in vivid landscapes and ecosystems, literature fosters a deep appreciation for nature. Writers like Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Dhan Gopal Mukerji and many similar writers have used literature to highlight environmental concerns. Nature writings have historically fuelled environmental movements. Rachel Carson with the help of her book '*Silent Spring*' led the modern environmental movement by exposing the dangers of pesticides. Indigenous authors like Robin Wall Kimmerer '*Braiding Sweetgrass*' blend scientific and traditional ecological knowledge to advocate for a sustainable future. Many writers have criticised industrialisation, deforestation, climate inaction and change. For instance, poets like William Wordsworth mourned the loss of nature due to urbanization. More recently, eco-fiction and climate fiction or cli-fi have emerged as genres that warn about the future consequences of human actions, such as Kim Stanley Robinson's '*Ministry for the Future*'.

Stories about endangered species, deforestation and climate change help in promoting conservation and sustainability by inspiring activism and policy changes. Fictional works like Richard Powers' *"The Overstory"* or Amitav Ghosh's *"The Great Derangement"* address ecological destruction and encourage sustainable thinking. Traditional folklore and indigenous storytelling also contain ecological wisdom, teaching respect for nature. Literature often explores the deep bonds between humans and animals by emphasizing empathy and coexistence. Dhan Gopal Mukerji in his most loved children's book like *"Kari the Elephant"* and *"Gay-Neck"* has portrayed animals as intelligent beings with emotions, reinforcing the need for ethical treatment and wildlife conservation. These works challenge the idea of human supremacy over nature.

Nature plays a crucial role in children's literature as it is a powerful way to introduce young minds to the wonders of the natural world. In an engaging and entertaining way, nature writing in juvenile literature creates environmental awareness, curiosity and appreciation for the mother nature. Through the vivid description, absorbing narratives and relatable characters in the form of animals, authors try to introduce young readers to the beauty of nature and the interconnectedness of human, nature and non-human. By combining storytelling with environmental themes, the writers of children's literature inspire curiosity, responsibility and a lifelong appreciation for the earth. Dhan Gopal Mukerji, an Indian-American writer is best known for his nature writing and children's books. He was the first Indian author to gain literary recognition in the United States. His work *"Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon"* (1927) won the prestigious Newbery Medal for his contribution in the field of juvenile literature in 1928. In Mukerji's writings we witness vivid description of the Himalayan landscape, animals and the connection between humans and nature. With poetic and philosophical writing style, Mukerji often explores the themes of harmony and biocentrism in all his works dedicated to children. The present paper is an attempt to study and highlight the affectionate relationship of nature towards living being with special reference to Mukerji's own childhood experiences while growing up in India. His works introduce both Indian and western readers to the Indian village life, traditions and the importance of animals and nature in Indian culture providing a cultural insight to the indigenous life. Mukerji was a pioneer in introducing Indian stories to western readers, his works paved the way for more diverse storytelling in English literature, particularly bringing Indian narratives to a global audience.

## II. CELEBRATION OF WILDLIFE AND NATURE IN MUKERJI'S JUVENILE FICTION

Mukerji's books provide vivid descriptions of Indian picturesque landscape, from lush green forests to bustling rivers, immersing readers in the beauty of nature. His depiction of animals is not just scientific but also emotional, portraying them as sentient beings with intelligence, emotions and unique personalities. Mukerji's works emphasize a respectful and compassionate approach to animals. Rather than treating them as mere property or tools, his stories depict animals as companions, teachers and equals in the natural world. In his work, *"Kari the Elephant"* Mukerji has depicted a deep bond of mutual understanding and love between the young child protagonist and Kari, the elephant companion. Elephants are considered as one of the most intelligent animals on earth. They have excellent long-term memory, which helps them remember water sources, migration routes and even other elephants over many years. These majestic giants even show complex human emotions like joy, grief and empathy. Living in a matriarchal societies and close relationship with family, elephants are seen working cooperatively with their herd members. Elephants are among few animals to pass the mirror test, showing a sign of self-recognition. Only a few other species like apes, dolphins and humans have demonstrated such quality of self-awareness. In the story Mukerji has opted elephant as character with a purpose as elephants are symbolically important in all the religions of India. The child protagonist of the novel has learned a lot from the friendly relationship with Kari. Kari has taught him patience and sense of responsibility with a sensitive attitude towards nature. This shows how our culture has always included animals in different tradition and customs. We never separate animals from our rituals and culture rather we treat them as our extended family member. The familial bond between Kari and the child trainer represents that we all are tied in a single thread and even animals are the part of the oversoul.

In another masterpiece *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon*, the child protagonist raises a pigeon and learns about its instincts, survival skills and interactions with the environment. The novel highlights the intricate balance of nature and the impact of human intervention on wildlife. *Gay-Neck* explores the themes of survival and adaptation, illustrating how animals and humans must coexist without disturbing the natural balance. His emphasis on understanding rather than conquering nature aligns with modern environmental ethics. Published

in the year 1924, "*Hari, the Jungle Lad*" is another adventurous novel that explores the life of a young boy, Hari, who grows up in the Indian jungle. Like Kari, the Elephant; *Hari, the Jungle Lad* is a natural-cultural story providing a vivid and green picture of the nature. The novel deals with the deep connection between human and animal beings. In the book, Hari is portrayed as the child of nature who is taught to love fellow living beings and to live in harmony with the rest of the beings and mother nature. As mentioned in Vedic scriptures and Upanishads, from times immemorial humans are provided with the responsibility to look after the betterment of the nature. Our role was always to monitor and observe nature and not to master or rule over it. Hari is not a conqueror of the jungle but a child of nature, living in harmony with the environment. In his novel, Mukerji celebrates the wisdom of indigenous knowledge and oral storytelling as Hari learns from elders and nature itself. This work of Mukerji is more than just an adventure story- it is a philosophical meditation on the relationship between human and nature. Through Hari's journey, Mukerji challenges western ideas of dominion over the natural world, offering instead a vision of balance, respect and interconnectedness.

Similar themes are noted in his other children's works like- "*Jungle Beasts and Men*" (which is a collection of stories featuring various animals of the Indian jungle); another work "*Ghond, the Hunter*" is a novel about an Indian hunter and his deep understanding of nature, showcasing traditional hunting methods and respect for wildlife. In the "*The Chief of the Herd*" Mukerji has narrated a tale about a leader among elephants and the challenges faced by animals in the wild. In all his works, Mukerji has beautifully blended Indian folklore, spiritual philosophy and ecological concerns making them significant contributions to early multicultural literature.

### III. INFLUENCE OF INDIAN SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY IN HIS NATURE WRITING

Mukerji's environmental consciousness is deeply rooted in Vedic culture and Indian philosophy, particularly in Hindu and Buddhist traditions that view all living beings as interconnected and interdependent on one another. His works reflect the idea that nature is sacred and should be preserved rather than dominated. This is in contrast with the western perspectives of the time which often focused on taming or exploiting nature for human benefit. Mukerji's works seem to harmonise the eastern and the western perspectives by acknowledging the integral values and traditions from both the worlds- East and the West. Mukerji in his works blend Indian spiritual philosophy with western literary forms. In his writings, he explores the themes of Indian spirituality, mysticism and the pursuit of truth, drawing upon the traditional Indian philosophical concepts such as dharma (duty), karma (action and its consequences) and moksha (liberation). Mukerji frequently emphasises the spiritual connection between human and nature. His works often depict the natural world as a pathway to transcendence and a reflection of divine order. Mukerji views nature as teacher and a source of enlightenment. He often portrays animals, forests and rivers as possessing an inherent wisdom that humans can learn from. His nature writing is deeply infused with the theme of transcendence, reflecting his Indian spiritual heritage and his sensitivity to the harmony of all life. His works often depict nature as not just a physical reality but a spiritual life force that offers wisdom and harmony. For Mukerji nature is not merely a backdrop but an active force guiding individuals towards discovery of self and spiritual growth. For example, in his seminal work *Gay-Neck: the Story of a Pigeon*, Mukerji tells the story of a pigeon who is raised in the Himalayas. The bird's experiences in the wild- its survival during the world war I, its encounter with danger, and its return home- mirror the spiritual journey of the self. The novel emphasizes how nature teaches resilience, patience and peace. The Himalayas landscape in *Gay Neck* is depicted as a sacred space, where silence, beauty and vastness encourage reflection and transcendence.

Mukerji's works suggest that by observing and understanding nature, humans can transcend their limited egos and connect with a greater cosmic order. This idea is rooted in Indian philosophical traditions like Advaita Vedanta, which emphasizes the oneness of all existence. He often contrasts the peaceful, cyclical rhythms of nature with the chaos of modern civilization. He suggests that nature offers a sanctuary from human conflicts, allowing one to rediscover inner peace. The protagonist in *Gay- Neck* finds solace in nature after witnessing the horrors of war. The narrative suggests that nature has the power to heal both the mind and the soul.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Mukerji critiques industrialization and materialism in his works implying that true wisdom comes not from wealth or power but from living in harmony with the natural world. His works are deeply spiritual using landscapes, animals and natural cycles to explore themes of self-discovery, transcendence and inner peace. His works suggests that through deep communion with nature, one can overcome suffering, fear and the distractions of modern life, ultimately attaining a sense of spiritual fulfilment. His vision aligns with traditional Indian philosophy, where nature is not just an external reality but a sacred presence that reveals deeper truths about existence. Mukerji wrote from a biocentric viewpoint grounded in Indian philosophy, seeing humans as one part of a greater whole. Modern environmental ethics reject human-centred thinking and call for eco-centric approaches that consider the rights of rivers, forests, animals, and entire ecosystems. Today's ecological science and activism stress interconnected systems—how climate, ecosystems, and human societies are linked. Mukerji's stories often reflect Indian philosophical ideas of oneness with nature, showing how imbalance in one part of the ecosystem affects all others.

#### AUTHOR AND AFFILIATION

Sweta Raj, a research scholar, pursuing her PhD from the Department of English, Patna University (2020-2024). The area of her interest includes Children's literature, Oriental Myth, Ecology, Translation studies and Creative Writing in English. Previously, a Postgraduate from Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi and a Graduate from Mahila Maha Vidyalaya, Banaras Hindu University. Also holds Postgraduate Diploma in Translation from IGNOU.

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