

## Eco-Consciousness through Children's Literature - A Study

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*“Man is a child of his environment”*

- Shinichi Suzuki

### I

At the dawn of the new millennium, the whole globe is facing serious ecological crisis. The most urgent issues like global warming, chronic resource shortage, rainforest destruction, and species extinction indicate the “end of nature”. Myriads of physical as well as mental problems are emerging due to the environmental crisis. If we wish to pass on a safe and healthy world to children then protection of environment will be the issue of immediate concern.

There is an utmost need today that the children must be made aware regarding the present state, protection and preservation of the environment. Eco-writing, in the form of children’s literature can enhance environmental literacy. This paper is an attempt to emphasize how eco-literature can motivate the children to get engaged with the environment and develop their knowledge of environmental concepts. It examines Ecocriticism as a field through the critical lens of children’s literature. The term Eco-criticism was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”. It did not become popular until the 1989 meeting of the Western Literature Association, when Cheryll Glotfelty employed the word as a part of a vocabulary for a critical approach to studying nature writing. In the collection *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty explains:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its readings of the texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (xviii)

Children’s literature is funny, interesting, informative, and imaginative. Picture books are a very effective tool to promote environmental literacy. They breathe life into concepts that are perceived to be dead in the textbooks. Further, they give words and pictures to help the children think about issues and situations along with providing stories. Through story, children’s literature becomes

powerful mode of shaping the mindset of children. The phrase “once upon a time,” invites the reader to share the content inside. These invitations become even more effective when the words are elaborated with illustrations. Through the use of picture books, children of all ages are able to learn about the many facets of their environment and better understand the inter-relatedness of their lives with their surroundings. David Mitchell termed these books as “picture storybooks” and explains them as works “in which the pictures and the text are tightly intertwined. Neither the pictures nor the words are self-sufficient; they need each other to tell the story” ( 87).

An excellent example of picture books is *Flute’s Journey: The Life of a Woodthrush* by Lynne Cherry. The story begins in the Belt Woods of Maryland where two children watch a newly-fledged Woodthrush whom they name Flute. The thrush begins the journey to Costa Rica. On its way back, it encounters dangers. It’s an outstanding book for understanding habitats, migration, and some human-caused reasons for species decline. The most beneficial part of the book is the account of how Flute has been saved by the efforts of school children. Cherry illustrates each page with pictures of plants and animals which surround the location. Thus, this book serves as an example for the children who need to see how they can make a difference.

Teachers can encourage their students to go through the books about environmental literacy and tell them about the messages which these books have for the humanity. Literature can be an effective tool for teaching earth science and fossils. The children can be made to read books like *A Dinosaur Named Sue: The Story of the Colossal Fossil* by Pat Reif. For illustration of his point, the teacher can bury some fossils and the children may be allowed to dig them up and use toothbrushes to clean them. Similarly, to teach about trees, books like *Have You Seen Trees* by Joanne Oppenheim, and *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, can be recommended. Children can be led in a hug-a-tree activity, in which they are blindfolded and led to a tree by another child. The blindfolded child then can be made to explore the tree—its bark, its circumference, because later he or she will be asked to pick that tree out of several choices. This activity may please the children so much that they ask to return to their tree on successive days.

Literature through visual aids can also be used to promote environmental consciousness among children. An excellent video that a teacher can use to teach about habitats is *A Home for Pearl*. It is a story about taking responsibility for the earth: an eagle is rehabilitated, and children research habitats that are appropriate for releasing the eagle. The video can be shown in small segments, in order to discuss the vocabulary terms. A teacher can also tell one’s students to search different habitats.

Till now, children's literature and ecocriticism have largely been separate issues. Apart from addressing their intersections, it is imperative to acknowledge earlier efforts made in this direction so as to bring these fields together. For Example, the spring 1995 issue of the *American Nature Writing Newsletter*, is devoted to the special topic "Children's literature and the Environment." The winter 1994-1995 issue of the *Children's literature Quarterly*, guest-edited by Betty Greenaway is also devoted to "Ecology and the Child." Owing to such scholarship, the mutual history of children's literature and environmental writing can be envisioned. Suzanne Rahn's introduction to the December 1995 "Green Worlds" issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* suggests a particular beginning point for environmentally-conscious children's literature in America. Classical children's literature has long been preoccupied with natural history, ecology, and human-animal interaction.

It is a common perception that the relationship between children and nature is twofold. On the one hand, there is the belief that children are innocent as William Wordsworth's 1807 "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" acts as a baseline for this perspective on childhood. Children are presumed to have a privileged relationship to nature where they have the hope of enjoying Arcadian pleasures. On the other hand, the child is assumed to be devoid of content, a *tabula rasa*. A child has no necessary connection with nature, no experience or understanding of it, so it is presumed that the onus lies on elders to make the children aware of their natural surroundings. The U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement distributed a pamphlet entitled "What Can I Teach My Young Child about the Environment?" It argues that environmental education should begin during the formative years of life. The writers of the pamphlet believe that "such experiences play a crucial role in shaping life-long attitudes, values, and patterns of behaviour towards natural environments" (3). This belief is based on two premises. First is the assumption that children who are not exposed to the natural environment and its concerns at an early age can never acquire the respect and value of nature that society considers appropriate. Second is the more fundamental notion that interaction with the environment is an important part of healthy child development.

Ruskin Bond shows his serious concern for depletion of the natural resources. The invariable setting of his works is the natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie. His works reflect his fervent faith in the healing powers of nature. His major concern is his worry for the unthoughtful actions of man towards nature. Through his short stories for children he has tried to convey the importance of nature in our life. In his 'An Island of Trees,' through the story that the grandmother reveals to her granddaughter, Koki, Ruskin emphasizes the importance of the deep bond that grows between humans and nonhumans, only if there exists love and compassion

between them. Similarly, 'No Room for a Leopard' is the story of deforestation and its accompanying aftermath. It also presents the predicament of the animals after deforestation. In 'Copperfield in the Jungle,' the author shows his abhorrence towards unjustified hunting for pleasure. 'The Tree Lover', 'The Cherry Tree', 'All Creatures Great and Small' and many others are the depictions of the chain which binds man and nature, like the chain of ecosystem, showing their interdependence. Ruskin's basic mission in his stories is to emphasize the friendly relationship between man and nature. He has brought before us our need for each other in his works. Thus, his works are replete with pity for the unsympathetic and cruel attitudes of human beings towards nature.

Kenneth B. Kidd's *Wild Thing: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* is another highly informative book about children's literature and eco-consciousness. It is a collection of essays about the interplay of children's texts- literary, multimedia, cultural- and children's environmental experience. It examines the ways in which literature, media, and other modes of representation can be shaped by nature, place, and ecology, and can have invigorating impact on the children's consciousness. In one of its essays, entitled "Foundation-Stones": Natural History for Children in *St. Nicholas Magazine*", Kaye Adkins examines *St. Nicholas*, a nineteenth-century magazine that, according to him, "recognized [children's] natural curiosity and intelligence and their special ways of learning about the world." The magazine was intended by its publishers to "improve society, provide moral and ethical guidance, and help the growing middle class, as well as immigrants, share the values of 'patriotism, respect for the family, hard work, self-reliance, and social concern' in addition to connecting religion and science." Adkins provides a history of *St. Nicholas*, accounting for its environmentally conscious agenda. In examining how children's texts have engaged the natural world, such historical accounts are crucial to our understanding of the tradition of children's literature and ecological literacy. In another essay entitled "Somewhere outside the Forest: Ecological Ambivalence in Neverland From *The Little White Bird To Hook*", M.Lynn Byrd, the essayist explores the history of the Peter Pan, the most familiar figure in children's literature. He also examines some of the more popular incarnations of its characters and looks specifically at four versions of Peter Pan and Neverland: two of J.M.Barrie's novels and two most recent film versions. He initiates these critiques from an ecocritical perspective, arguing that these four versions of the Peter Pan myth are ecocritical. Byrd aligns these texts with Cheryl Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism, claiming that each of the Peter Pan myths "takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature" (Glotfelty xix).

For many, the environmental movement in children's literature began in 1971 with Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*. The book has become the

canonical text of literary environmentalism and thus also the object of study in educational settings ranging from the lowest grade classrooms to university programs. In the ninth chapter of the book, Tara L. Holton and Tim B. Rogers offer a nuanced analysis of the changes and continuities in nature representation in the Canadian children's periodical *Owl Magazine*, founded in 1976. Arlene Pelvin in her essay "Still Putting Out "Fires": *Ranger Rick* and Animal/Human Stewardship," turns her attention to the American nature magazine *Ranger Rick* and its ethic of "modulated anthropocentric stewardship." She holds the stance that this magazine is a forerunner of ecocriticism in emphasizing the interdependence of human and animal life.

An important concept of environmental justice has been dealt with in *The Lorax* from children's perspective. In her essay "Environmental Justice Children's Literature: Depicting, Defending and Celebrating Trees and Birds, colors and People", Kamala Platt challenges the consensus understanding of ecocriticism. She also offers fascinating readings of environmental justice books for children. Her three texts are: *The Story of Colors/ La historia de los colores: A Folktale from the jungles of Chiapas*, by the Subcomandante Insurgente Morcos of Mexico's Zapatista National Liberation Army; *The People Who Hugged the Trees*, an environmental folktale that motivated the Chipko movement in India; and *Rani and Felicity: The Story of Two Chickens*, an Indian environmental justice story that criticizes corporate capitalist agriculture, published by the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Natural Resource Policy in New Delhi. Platt acknowledges the challenge that each text takes up: how to represent troubling histories of cultural and environmental devastation "without shattering a sense of hope" among young readers.

In his essay "Eco-edu-tainment: The Construction of the Child in Contemporary Environmental Children's Music," Michelle H. Martin meditates on children's environmental music as a form of "eco-edu-tainment". He reminds us how useful other cultural genres can be in helping children experience nature. Emphasizing the debts of such music to both American folk music and certain genres of children's writing, Martin offers close readings of songs that are alternately problematic and exemplary in their balance of instruction and amusement. e.g. the later work of the Banana Slug String Band- at once empowers children as agents of social change yet is more biocentric than anthropocentric in emphasis.

Susan Jane Dauer, in her essay "Cartoons and Contamination: How the Multinational Kids Help Captain Planet Save Gaia" considers how *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*- an "ecofictional cartoon series that was one of the most popular shows for children in the early 1990s . . . uses ecological fantasy to teach children about their responsibilities to the world, staking its claim to the didactic and

giving its violence a moral purpose.” Dauer reviews the ecological mission of the show, in terms of both its themes and its invitation to viewers to participate in local and global environmental activism.

Thus, children’s literature can be an effective medium in kindling the environment- consciousness. Children’s literature with a tinge of ecological issues can help promote eco-consciousness among the future generations. Mothers can play a significant role by becoming the first teachers of their children in this respect. As they make their children sleep by singing lullabies, they must take the initiative of telling the stories about destruction of environment today in order to create awareness among the children. It will be highly beneficial because if children are encouraged to explore nature from the beginning, they will not face the extreme experiences. Children’s literature, intertwined with ecological issues, can render the most valuable service to the humanity in that context.

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