

Chapter 9



Resistance against Ecological Holocaust in Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

The repertoire of Children's Literature encompasses the fundamental concerns, artistic manifestations and playful activities concerning the world of children. The paradigm shift of this representation evolves from imaginative capturing of events in the world of fantasy to an emphasis on contemporary issues concerning the entire planet. Sustainability Activism is defined as a broad philosophy, ideology and social initiative incorporating wise management of natural resources that gives weightage to harmonious co-existence of life, habitat, and surroundings. The defining issue of our time with far-reaching transforming and

degrading impact is the climate change which alters the existing ecosystems and create global inequities. The visible changes in this regard include commotion of food chain, variations of migratory patterns and reproductive behaviours of birds and animals caused by melting icecaps, warming and acidifying waters, heatwaves, disappearing shorelines, firestorms, flooding and drought. The methodology of Reader Response Criticism is relevant as it highlights the interface of the child and the book as reader and the text. Michael Benton theorizes how children engage in reading, develop as readers of literature and comprehend texts from the point of view of reader's responses. The act of reading the tales of ecological heroes is likely to empower them through imitating them and moving beyond activism. The process of including children in the environmental discourse is a positive standpoint to inculcate within the minds of children the origins, effects and possible solutions of climate change. The paper attempts to position children as crucial agents to the future of climate change leadership and bringing out climate equity. The study takes into consideration the Turkish writer, Hasan Toptas' translated English work *I am a Hornbeam Branch* (2016). The environmental texts empower the children as eco-citizens who identify themselves as eco-heroes and texts propose diverse strategies to assist the victims of climate change. The study as such looks in detail the contributions made by Ecological writers for children and places them as missionaries of restoring ecological balance. Resistance against environmental degradation is well sketched in the selected book.

Keywords: sustainability, climate change, children, ecology and eco-citizens.

Children's books do not exist in vacuum- they have real, argumentative readers and visible, practical and consequential uses- so the theory of children's literature constantly blends in to the practice of bringing books and readers together"

—Peter Hunt

The phase of childhood is the foremost juncture of our lives and children are assailable, susceptible and must be defended from maneuver. Literature is an admirable concept that trains and educates children to adapt and assimilate a particular kind of culture. Ideological frameworks of the cultures across the world shapes and influence the children's books. The history of Children's literature has a close association with the elements of folk and fairy tales and the oral tradition. The paramount importance of children's literature is reinstated through the observation that this writing draws reader's attention to "an obvious point at which theory encounters real life, where we are forced to ask: what can we say about a book, why should we say it, how can we say it, and what effect will what we say have?" (Hunt, p.2).

The goal-oriented nature of children's literature has been earmarked for the assimilation of socio-cultural values. Ecological crisis and disasters have generated an accelerated perception of sustainability. The term 'ecology' fits appropriately within the framework of educational, social, cultural, and political discussion in current scenario. The intimate interconnection between nature and humans is instilled within the young minds through writings; for children become "imaginary subjects of instruction" (Berstein's Phrase 1990). The exploitative approach towards nature should be shifted to the fact that harmonious co-existence between man

and nature result in a sustainable partnership. The romantic idealization of nature as serene and nurturing in opposition to the fragmented relation that man has inflicted upon nature is a crucial deviation from sustainable eco-centric lifestyle. Transmission of eco-friendly messages through Children's literature is an effective mode to heal the split and inspire young readers to be in constant engagement with nature.

The concept of sustainable development is a motivational phrase as it carries forth ways and measures for bettering lives. Children's writings are instrumental in communicating and influencing the future generation about the pathways of environmental socialization. The early days of childhood imbibe and internalize the social construction of environmental issues; giving an awareness as on how our cultural factors and anthropocentrism triggers nature's imbalance and conflicts. Exploration of such themes and methodology impacted children's books which shifted the perception of children as "immature audience" to informed group.

The collective or individual action to sustain the environment by eliminating the issues that deters our planet's feasibility, examining and scrutinizing the concerns from community to global level, formulate strategies to instill awareness, and looking for alternative solutions to cope up the problem come within the purview of Sustainability Activism. The persistent nature of sustainability issues traces its roots in 1987 with the Brundtland Report, the commission on Environment and Development. Release of *Our Common Future* emphasized the inevitability and continuity of sustainability practices. Rio Earth Summit in 1992 favours the grounds of sustainability as rooted in three pillars like economic, environmental, and social. Environment pillar supports measures like renewable energy, tree planting, organic farming, reducing fossil fuel consumption and following sustainable agriculture.

The term “holocaust” often designates a human based intervention leading to devastating catastrophe. Devastation strategy against nature by humans encapsulates the term “Ecological Holocaust”. Our planet earth adversely witnesses a serious threat and damage to nature. The uprooting of environmental concerns as a matter of disengagement of humans with nature intensifies the act of viewing nature as an object or raw material to be exploited on massive scale. This idea supports civilization and development which become meaningful through man’s monopoly over nature. Humans, thus have been bestowed with the title “nature’s greatest threat” and their active contributions to science and technology through depletion of nature dismantles natural balance for a sustainable world. Carl Jung (1994) observed that the child “has not yet divided and separated his specific experience with irreducible oppositions. In his narrow universe, spirit and matter are intertwined and they are defined as gods who produce humans in forests and fields” (p.34). Environmental literacy is best articulated through children’s writings; words and pictures guide their minds to carry forward the thrust of nature into future without affecting the limits of modernity to individuals.

Childhood is the age of imitation and the adults can easily get a child being influenced with values and culture. The paper attempts to socialize children to have sound environment knowledge, attitudes and practices. Further it also upholds the ways to improve environment and pro-environment ideologies within the young readers through a glimpse of human involvement with nature and its consequent social issues.

Children’s Literature as an established discipline is an academic pursuit with roots in interdisciplinary studies like Environmental and Cultural Sociology, Environmental Education and Literature. This academic field has witnessed a transition from aura of imagination

to realism through the exploration of contemporary issues. The outlook on children before seventeenth century as “small adults” entrusted them with an ethical responsibility and children were exposed to moral stories and fables, riddles, and rhymes as well as religious tales. Oral story-telling tradition gratified children’s curiosity and children’s literature become synonymous with fantasy genre. The fabric of innocence entrusted with children during the romantic and enlightenment age disappeared with modernity and postmodernity. Children’s books of 1930’s and 50’s address matters and turmoils of society.

In the early stages of a printed literature, there are few or no books published specifically for children. There are perhaps a few books intended for broadly educational purposes, such as the courtesy or behaviour books printed in the fifteenth centuries in the European countries, or the twentieth century text books published to support the formal school curriculum in developing countries. In this situation children, as they learn to read, also take over adult books which appeal to them (Ray 1996: p.654).

The theme of ecological awareness in children’s books is well reflected through environmental dystopias. Numerous studies have been conducted by researchers pinpointing the inevitable bond that exists between child and environment. Mishra (2016) highlights the environmental issues in literary works in terms of ecocritical perspectives. Picture books unfolds new milieu and environment for children. Goins (2014) defines picture books as “marriage between text and images. Through either the opposition or union between words and artwork, meaning is made in picture books” (p.67). Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods* (2005) brought out the conflicts of children trapped indoors; their estrangement from nature and yearning to it; “At every moment the bond is breaking between the young and

the natural world” (p.3). Ulrich Beck’s *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992) deals with the Chernobyl and other man- made disasters. *Carbon Diaries* (2015) weaves the myriad forms of the imagined future of green politics.

Reader response criticism as a literary theory adds new dimensions to the meaning of texts and its comprehension by the readers. Paul Hazard (1983) points out that “children’s books help children acquire and understand a sense of humanity, ability to cross social and cultural boundaries and to imagine a world beyond their own” (45). The phenomenological theory of reading highlights the interaction between text and reader and is in congruence with the sustainable involvement between human and nature. Reader’s primary role in analyzing the text offers the evolving possibilities of meaning within cultural, historical and social institutions. “A reader always thinks during the act of reading. A reader must become aware and understand that reading and thinking are part of the same process of meaning making; they cannot be separated from the reading process” (Keene 2008 p.67)

We do not see a difference between human and nature: the human essence of nature and the natural essence of human unite in nature in the form of the production of diligence, just as they unite in human life as a species ... human and nature are not confronted like two opposite terms ... More precisely, they exist as sole and whole fundamental reality, hence the manufacturer’s product.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, as cited in Oppermann, 2012).

The fiction *I am a Hornbeam Branch* critically examines erasure of identity bestowed to nature resulting from human dominated hierarchy, portrayal of everyone except human as “other,” and the potentialities of nature written in an eco-critical language. The story unfolds the

agonizing existence of trees behind the Besparmak mountains through the perspective of child hornbeam. Human intervention unsettles the harmony as experienced by trees, birds, and animals in the pristine forest. Dreams of hornbeam get shattered after the forest dwellers made the decision to slash the trees. The novel encapsulates the ecological consciousness in search of identity and the philosophical journey of hornbeam and his friends alongside the journey of man to himself.

Birds would fly over me from morning till night, varicolored clouds from shape to form would fly. Of course, I also had neighbors, each one more beautiful than the other, greener than the other, better than the other. For example, a few trees tall, there lived a hunchbacked fir that was thirteen years older than me. There was also a middle-aged hornbeam just a short distance from him. Farther, there were red pines with their crispy cones, then there were fuzzy junipers, spruces, and chestnuts... (Topta^o, 2016: 7)

Eco-criticism is a realistic reflection of the representation of nature in works and “it scrutinizes the symbolic meanings attributed to nature, the thought patterns created by these meanings, how nature and animal species shape human cultures, how language is used, how to approach environmental problems” (Oppermann, 2012: 25). Toptas effectively articulates voice to creatures other than humans with a view to attribute a space in nature with all affective and emotional dimension. The instances of material transformation can effectively reduce human centered consciousness; “The herbs around us were even singing...Everything was participating with its own stance” (Toptas 8).

The reckless and relentless destruction of nature by man is strengthened by placing them at the prime center of values and power. Toptas feels “human is a strange puzzle that has not been solved for centuries, and it

carries the unknown secret of a universe full of dirt and unique beauties.” (28). The rationality to distinguish good from evil has been bestowed upon human beings but the desire to conquest and plunder the natural resources drive him beyond the understanding of being a part of nature. The notion of “other” that can be easily manipulated, manifested, and regulated heighten the ecological imbalance as “they would also ruthlessly crush many beauties under their feet without realizing it (29). The voice of “others” in fiction have been silenced by man who monopolizes the nature and fail miserably to apprehend nature; “these men were walking around with a wandering spirit, chewing the beautiful mountain flowers for a while... Of course, they never heard the screams of what they chewed and crushed. (11). The recognition of co-existence of nature and ecology and human and ecology dismiss the idea of imprisoning nature merely for its utilitarian and instrumental values.

The propaganda of Green Studies encourages people to engage in self-criticism, interrogate the unreliable behavioral phase towards nature and make an awareness to the formulation of ecological identity. The writer comes across some of the environmental issues “We were also hearing the screams of the felled trees rising towards the sky from where we were. Sometimes we even couldn’t stand it and were crying quietly.” (13). Carson (1962) clearly remarked about the “human who has gained significant power to change the nature of his world (5) in the twenty first century. The mechanical world view intensifies physical and spiritual exploitation leading to massive consumption culture; “While biodiversity is rapidly declining and species disappear, human societies are trying to maintain a system that is based on economic and industrial growth along with social-economic-environmental injustice and exceeds the carrying capacity of the ecosystem” (Aen, 2018: 34).

Hornbeam’s detachment from the soil is a painful

act but it still adapts with the transformation that human can bring out with the nature. The writer reinforces the message that the requirements of the people must be in equilibrium with the demands of ecosystem; "Now I started the resistance with all my power, to not to be wood when I fall into the hands of people. Moreover, resisting anything has already beautified me. It gave my existence many meanings that I did not know" (27). The production and consumption need of man in opposition with nature's stability leads to a crucial phenomenon called ecological crisis. The battle waged by man against nature is directed to his own survival in the realm of ecological disasters. Toptas mentions about the process called slow violence and its adverse impact on nature. He specifically focuses on the principle of "live and let live" as a bounding principle of preservation rather than facing the end of both nature and man. Hornbeam recalls how "things did not develop as I thought. I became neither a door nor a window in the prison workshop where I was taken away... I was cut and sawn, chipped, I became gallows. (102). Exploring deep into nature's soul and making a plea against environmental destruction, Toptas successfully creates a perception of protection and restore ecological consciousness. Trees communicate with the readers and raise their sense of empathy with hornbeam and others. *I am a Hornbeam Branch* makes a call to safeguard the inherent value of nature, rebound with nature, discern the wonders, and core values to the community of children to establish a sustainable relation with the nature.

The canon of Children's Literature propels as valid instrument for environmental stewardship. The diverse nature of ecological holocaust provides deeper comprehension of the problems surrounding nature and foster positive attitude to safeguard our environment. The cultural ideologies conferred to children about nature carve their cognition, perception, and attitudes to

environment. The value of non-anthropocentrism and ecocentrism along with pro-naturalistic thoughts are conveyed through the writings for children. “The environmental literature that children acquire has the capacity to make profound, lasting effects that appeal to both emotions and intelligence” (Gaard, 2009: 328). Environmental texts for children exhilarate and imagine non-human worlds as a parallel universe with closer contemplation to human and interacts with human actors.

Eco-literature is viewed as a major literary wave involving activism. Children as “being and becoming” eco-citizens open new vistas of responsibility and ethics. The transition from adult centric to child centric approach positions children as major contributors in everyday lives. Children with active involvement as eco-citizens find an immense solidarity with our planet and uphold the value of participation, care, and collective bonding with nature. The writers, thinkers and scholars who promote ecological awareness through their works are in fact creating an active generation of sustainable society.

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