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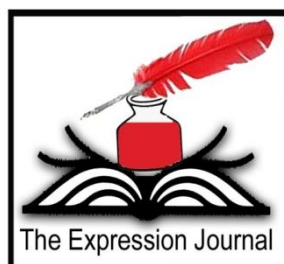
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Eco-Consciousness in Indian Children Fiction

Dr Deepa Yadav

Assistant Professor

Smt. Sharda Johari Nagar Palika Kanya Mahavidyalaya

Kasganj, Uttar Pradesh

E-Mail: mrs.deepayadav@gmail.com

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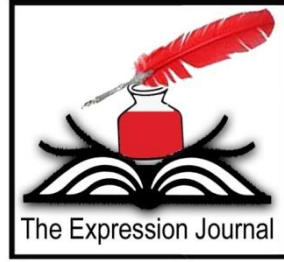
Abstract

Literature and nature are closely connected, with many genres glorifying nature and using it as a backdrop to enhance stories. Ecocriticism studies the link between the environment and literature, emerging as a distinct movement in the 1990s. Contemporary perspectives recognise the environment's influence on humanity, leading ecocritical literature to depict humans as products of their surroundings. William Rueckert introduced the term "ecocriticism" in his 1978 essay, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Indian English authors such as Vishnu Sharma, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, and Ruskin Bond skilfully incorporate nature into their works. It is important to become aware of environmental issues, and educating children is crucial for fostering this awareness. Ecological literacy, or ecocriticism, involves understanding the relationships among people, living organisms, and their environments. Books for children and young adults often present environmental themes, describe nature, and portray animals. Some introduce social justice issues in age-appropriate ways. This study aims to show how eco literature can help children develop a closer relationship with the environment. Children's literature, especially picture books, is engaging, informative, and imaginative. Picture books are effective tools to foster environmental literacy, animate textbook concepts, and help children think about issues through words and images.

Keywords

Environment, Information, Imagination, Ecocriticism, Creature, Children's Stories.

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Dr Deepa Yadav

Assistant Professor

Smt. Sharda Johari Nagar Palika Kanya Mahavidyalaya

Kasganj, Uttar Pradesh

E-Mail: mrs.deepayadav@gmail.com

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Children's literature offers engaging and imaginative stories that inform and entertain. Picture books are especially effective for promoting environmental literacy, making abstract ideas accessible through words and images. This medium helps children consider environmental issues while enjoying stories. Storytelling in children's literature shapes mindsets and cognitive skills, especially when illustrations complement the text. Subha Tiwari notes that the invention of talking animals in children's tales reflects a time when nature was deeply revered, and storytelling served to express collective hopes, fears, and values (Tiwari 73). Picture books allow children of all ages to explore their environment and understand their connection to the natural world. David Mitchell refers to these as "picture storybooks," where words and images depend on each other to tell a complete story (Mitchell 87). Children's literature spans genres by age, including picture books, traditional tales, fantasy, animal stories, realistic fiction, historical fiction, school and adventure stories, family tales, biographies, and verse. Many stories were first told orally before being published, adapting over time to reflect changing values and socio-cultural contexts. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, known as the Golden Age of Children's Literature, saw the publication of many important books. Kenneth B. Kidd's *Wild Thing: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* explore the link between children's literature and environmental awareness, highlighting how literature, media, and other representations of nature influence children's perspectives.

India is a vast country with diverse cultures and has the richest oral narrative tradition in the world, known as folklore. Fables, myths, and folklore are crucial components of children's literature. In ancient times, children learned in Gurukul, where they received education surrounded by nature, such as under trees or by rivers. Some of the oldest fables in the world, like those found in the Puranas, such as *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, and *Shrimad Bhagavata*, have delighted both children and adults. This tradition continues today through television serials and graphic novels. Collections like *Kathasarithasagara* and tales of brave warriors or clever jesters form the core of the oral narrative tradition. The *Panchatantra*, composed in Sanskrit in 200 B.C., along with other fables like the *Jataka Tales* and *Hitopanishada*, was meant to entertain and enlighten young minds. The Indian fables have

circulated for centuries and were eventually compiled under the guidance of Sage Vishnu Shrama, titled Panchatantra, which means the five tantras or books on policy or nitis. The Panchatantra tales have also influenced storytelling traditions in the West. An eco-centric reading of the Panchatantra reveals how children can learn about nature, its positive effects on living beings, and its workings. "The Indian Subcontinent in Literature for Children and Young Adults: Though Children's Literature is a relatively new genre in the Indian subcontinent, the idea of entertaining and instructing children through literature—both oral and written—is ancient. The subcontinent is rich in traditions and folklore, and story collections like the Panchatantra, Hitopanishada, Jataka Tales, and Katha Saritsagar were popular across the area" (Khorana Meena 11).

The Jataka Tales are Buddhist stories that teach compassion, showing how the nobility of wild creatures offers lessons to humans. The Buddha's love and respect for all living beings connect these tales. Finnigan researched how "Buddha Stories depict ecological knowledge alongside Buddhist sutras effectively. The stories encourage people to value and respect nature and all living organisms within ecosystems" (Finnigan). Authors Kyi and Kyi stated, "The moral ethics found in Jataka are the foundation of human civilisation. If everyone follows and practices these moral ethics, a more sensible and better human environment will emerge. There will be a peaceful and prosperous world where its residents enjoy worldly pleasures at present, and they will also be able to seek spiritual wealth for the future until they reach the cessation stage of the round of rebirths. Therefore, it is expected that if everyone follows the moral ethics described in Jataka, they will become good citizens with a strong sense of duty and good morality." (Kyi and Kyi 124). The Buddhist Jataka Tales, a collection of didactic stories, have entertained Buddhists in numerous countries for centuries. The Buddha's teachings are conveyed through these tales, promoting the philosophy of non-violence and encouraging respect for all living beings. Jatakas share stories of the Buddha's actions in previous lives. "Jatakas encompass many authentic early Indian folktales, forming one of the oldest collections of folktales in the world, akin to an Indian version of Grimm, long before the German brothers embarked on their quest to collect delightful stories" (Jacobs Joseph).

India's reputation as the cradle of storytelling continues in the print age, filled with books of fables, legends, folktales, and stories retold from Indian mythology. Indian writers have also adapted folklore and legends from other cultures. The oral tradition has transitioned successfully into books for young readers, primarily to replace the role of grandparents in today's nuclear families. Folktales are set in the beautiful, untouched landscapes of the past. They illustrate the traditional lifestyle of rural India, showcasing regional differences in dress, food, festivals, worship practices, social norms, and more. These tales often use various landscapes—forests, deserts, mountains, and seas—significant to communities living closely with nature. Folktales from across the country thus document the symbiotic relationship that nurtured the health and wealth of our ancestors. Literature has begun addressing environmental issues to offer a fresh perspective for humanity. Eco-criticism has emerged as a new field studying the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glottfelty Cheryl, 18).

R.K. Narayan is often known for being a light-hearted writer who uses humour as a weapon, uses Malgudi as his permanent setting, and uses idiomatic Indian English as his vernacular. However, various characteristics of the writer with nature and man's relationship as a repeating theme in the works of Narayan 'books and short tales, is always noticed by a diligent and thorough reader. Malgudi, the permanent setting, is depicted as a bustling town, metaphorically depicting a huge natural setting, complete with inhabitants, animals, and

nature itself as characters. Perhaps no other writer of his time has taken as keen an interest in environmental issues as Narayan. R.K. Narayan – ‘Swami and Friends’ from the ecocritical perspective portrays how Narayan represented the natural world in and around Malgudi, how he showed the symbiotic relationship between different elements of the ecosystem – urban and rural, animal and human, Western and Indian. It also shows how nature acted as a very important backdrop to different incidents portrayed in the novel. The topographical material presented in the novel also increases the readers’ interest. Narayan’s keen observation of nature and its relation with human beings is visibly seen in every chapter of the novel, making it fit for considering Narayan as a nature writer and many of his novels and stories as ecological texts. With Indian philosophical aspects the novel Swami and Friends appear as a children’s novel. Narayan gives a further vivid description of the various sounds and noises that Swami hears during his walk: “His feet came down on the ground with a light tick or a subdued crackle or a gentle swish, according to the object on the ground: small dry twigs, half-green leaves, or a thick layer of dry withered leaves. There were occasional patches of bare uncovered ground, and there the noise was a light thud, or pit pat; pit pat pit pat in monotonous repetition. Every noise entered Swaminathan's ears. For some time, he was conscious of nothing else. His feet said pish-pish-pish-pat pit-pat-swish and crackled....” (Swami and Friends 158). Narayan’s love for nature and its elements is clear with his in-depth and enormous description of the forest road into which Swaminathan enters as an escape from home and school. Swami entered the thin forest through a narrow road branching to the left of the Trunk Road. The place contained white ball-like wood-apple, green figs, and the deep purple Eugenia, peeped out of thick green foliage. (Swami and Friends 155). But the attraction for the road didn’t last long, as it was deserted and there was no life or traffic. The same trees which otherwise would have attracted Swami in normal conditions now started frightening him because of his loneliness. The branch road oppressed him with stillness. His weakness due to a long walk and desperation to go home raged a fierce hunger within him. When hunger became unbearable, he plucked and ate fruits (Swami and Friends 156). This incident shows the role of nature as a giver. Malgudi, the setting of the novel, appears like a microcosmic representation of the universe – presenting different characters and situations that can have universal appeal – but in the form of a typical South Indian, middle-class setting. “His image as a witty story writer has cast a pall over his environmental spirit. His characters do not surprise or shock us as they are regular facets of nature, both human and non-human. Narayan’s characters are peasants, labourers, drivers, and common men who have a beautiful relationship with Mother Nature.” (Mishra 240:2013) The little town Malgudi can be considered as an Ecosystem representing the interdependence of nature and man, the relation between different elements of nature – the place, the human beings, the animals, birds, forests, trees, etc. The role played by nature in man’s life and man’s treatment or ill-treatment of nature – man’s treatment of his fellow elements of nature, etc., are well represented in this novel. “Indian philosophy is rich in ecological thought since the Veda, which paid equal importance to all organisms. India is also a land of rich biodiversity. From the Himalayas of the North to Kanyakumari of South, from the Bay of Bengal off the east to the Arabian Sea on the west, the country has versatile physical surroundings, leaving a deep impact on human beings. Literature is not apart from that. A good number of writers deal with ecocritical texts” (Mishra 169:2016)

Ruskin Bond, as a writer of children's stories, presents the natural world and the goodness of people. He promotes environmental appreciation and a happy coexistence

between humans, especially children, and the natural world through his writings. Bond's descriptions of nature are so vivid and engaging that they take the reader to peaceful places and make them feel as though they are there, experiencing everything from the sights and sounds to the smells. Bond's writings serve as a gentle reminder of the importance and wonder of the natural world, inspiring readers to value and protect it. Bond brings his personal world of Dehradun to vivid life and draws his readers in. The Garhwal hills, the subtropical Shivalik's, and Dehradun all come to life thanks to his vivid descriptions. He captures the specialness of the everyday while evocatively evoking its landscapes, customs, occupation, and hardship. His works of fiction have the flavour of regional or national literature. His depiction of the people and culture of the hills is characteristic of a nature writer.

Ruskin Bond's debut novella, *The Room on the Roof*, depicts his feelings and thoughts as he interacts with nature. His writings often transport readers to the idyllic landscapes of the Indian Himalayas and offer a deep connection to nature that is both intimate and enchanting. One of the most striking aspects of Bond's nature writings is his keen observation of the natural world. Whether he is describing the rustling leaves in the forest, the call of a distant bird, or the play of sunlight on a mountain stream, Bond's attention to every minute detail is mesmerising. *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, a collection of autobiographical stories of Ruskin Bond. It documents the journey of Bond from his childhood to the time when he became a grown man. He tells many tales interwoven with his own life experiences. Bond's *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* can be easily interpreted as an allegory of the human journey. The growing relationship between characters and nature in the stories symbolises the transition from innocence to experience in the way characters adapt themselves to the natural world. They undergo a transformative process, reflecting the big changes that occur as an individual confronts challenges in life. Bond's vivid projection of the beauty of nature and its role in shaping the characters' lives signifies the awakening of wisdom and self-awareness. It also explores how our connection with the natural world serves as a metaphor for the universal path from innocence to the nuanced depths of experience. Through his writings, Bond not only connects readers to the landscapes he describes but also inspires a profound appreciation for the environment and a sense of responsibility toward its preservation. (Hornsey 38)

The Cherry Tree's Rakesh and his grandfather had a house on the outskirts of Mussoorie, close to the woods. His grandpa worked as a forest warden and eventually retired. Since his parents' hometown lacked a suitable educational facility, he was required to relocate to the area around Mussoorie. There weren't many fruit trees in this area of the Himalayan foothills due to the stony terrain and dry, chilly air. Rakesh, a man with a deep appreciation for red cherries, put a seed in the stony soil, and soon the fruitful tree was an integral part of his life.

In "The Blue Umbrella," Binya is a girl from the hills. The woman "..... belonged to the mountains, to this part of the Himalayas known as Garhwal." She was brave and bold because she went a long way to get fresh grass for her cows. Bond writes, "Like most mountain girls, Binya was pretty strong. She had pink cheeks, dark eyes, and black hair pulled back into a pigtail." She wore a necklace made of glass beads and pretty glass bracelets around her arms. An animal claw from a leopard hung from the chain. It worked like a dream. Binya grew up in a hilly area; she wasn't scared of the dark, dense woods or the empty hills. The only time she felt lonely and nervous was when she was in the market and got lost among all the people.

Overall, Bond's stories provide kids a chance to develop a love of nature through entertaining short stories. White and Stoecklin detail the essential elements of a child-friendly natural setting. In Ruskin Bond's literary universe, nature is not just a setting but a source of

inspiration, solace, and reflection. Ruskin Bond fabricates nature by utilising joining legends, experience, dreams and history to uncover human coordinated effort with the non-human world. It additionally endeavours to locate his discerning duty with a thought concerning advancing toward a cataclysm of the overall condition. Eco-critical approaches make assessments concerning the relationship between nature and human culture and sit in addition to see at what minute the makers address their assets (Govind Appa 21-30). Bond's stories consist of things like water, an abundance of native trees, bushes, flowers, insects, and butterflies, the changing of the seasons, wind, light, sounds, and weather, and safe, undisturbed places to sit, stand, lean, climb, and find cover and shade. Bond's writings are filled with natural scenes, which aim to enchant young readers with tales of the outdoors. "His stories can be likened to an ecological narrative designed to spread awareness about the bitter consequences of human actions that damage the planet's basic life support system. His stories subtly weave in messages about the importance of preserving nature, respecting its delicate balance, and living in harmony with the environment". (Jayasree, A. and Shobha, 12-13). Motivating children to conserve the environment out of gratitude and to have affection and concern for the adults who supported them when they were little, as well as instilling in them an optimistic outlook and the confidence to take on the world with bravery. Ruskin Bond shows his serious concern for the depletion of 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 lives. In his 'An Island of Trees,' through the story that the grandmother reveals to her granddaughter, Koki, Ruskin emphasises the importance of the deep bond that grows between humans and nonhumans, only if there exist 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 depictions of the chain which binds man and nature, like the chain of the ecosystem, showing their interdependence. Ruskin's basic mission in his stories is to emphasise the friendly relationship between man and nature. He has brought before us our need for each other in his works.

Thus, children's literature can be an effective medium in kindling environmental consciousness. Through the lens of eco-criticism, we can appreciate the profound ecological consciousness embedded in the children's narratives and their relevance in the contemporary environmental discourse. Children's literature with a tinge of ecological issues can help promote eco-consciousness among future generations. Elders of the family 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 the destruction of the 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 extreme experiences. Children's literature, intertwined with ecological issues, can render the most valuable service to humanity in that context. Children's literature plays an important role in the mental and cognitive development of the young ones who are the future citizens of this earth. Through stories, picture book stories, children can learn the importance of ecology and environmental threats. They will take better care of nature, preserve nature, and thereby make attempts to restore the ecological balance in an age of environmental degradation.

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