

Ecological Concerns in Indian Children's Literature in English: Deepak Dalal's *Ranthambore Adventures*

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Children's Literature offers one of the most extensive sources for the study of ideas about nature, the environment, ecology and the role of humans in relation to all of these in contemporary society. (LesnikOberstein 216).

The environment is vital concern of man on earth. Having ruthlessly subjected it to destruction for a long time man is now waking up to realize his follies and is trying to make amends for his erstwhile vandalism. Nature refers to the phenomena of the physical world and also to the life in general. Right from the existence of human race on the planet, man has looked at nature as a source of energy and life. In the primitive stage, man was totally dependent on the natural resources to survive. As in the prophetic vision of a Kashmiri saint NundReshi (1438 AD), "food is subservient to forests (*Ann posh teliyeilwann posh*)". These resources helped him immensely to achieve different stages of development and progress. He has capitalized on these sources and made his life better from ancient to modern period. But in this modern scientific and robotic age man has forgotten nature and ecology.

Ecology has been a distinctive feature of many an ancient literature. There is close relationship between Nature and literature, in the past and the current times writers in almost all cultures of the world have written about the subject. Ecocriticism, as defined by Cheryl Glotfelty in her 1996 introduction to the *Ecocriticism Reader*, is: "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). It seems simple enough, well-designed yet open ended; this definition leaves a lot of flexibility. In fact, one of the most useful and promising characteristics of ecocriticism is its potential for comprehensiveness. Currently an expanding genre, it promotes opportunities for critics from other schools and disciplines to enter and participate in its discussions, opening up rich opportunities for interdisciplinary study. Richard Kerridge suggests:

The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces.

Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as response to environmental crisis (Qtd in Greg Garrd. 4).

Ecocriticism validates how nature exists in literature .A literary text has always a strong and larger outside forces as Foucault says in the first chapter ‘Unities of Discourse’ of *Archaeology of Knowledge*, “The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut... it is a node within a network... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative” (qtd in O'Gorman 22). Today the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analysed and emphasized in all departments of knowledge and development. U. Sumathy writes in the preface of her book *Ecocriticism in Practice*,

Literature can effectively create awareness about environment. None can deny the fact that along with issues like racism and feminism, it is time for environmentalists to occupy centre stage. Just as postcolonialism champions the cause of the ‘other’, ecocriticism upholds the voice of the ‘nonhuman other’. With environmental problems mounting by the day, and when survival is at stake for planet earth, ‘eco’ has become the much south-after prefix for all fields, Literature included (Preface).

In this regard ecocriticism became the need of the hour as most critical theories. The literary critic tries to study how this close relationship between nature and society has been textualized by the writer in his work.

Our planet is being polluted by humans and their advanced technology. Nowadays, people invent innovations to make their lives easier. However, natural resources such as trees, animals and water are used as raw material to produce energy in order to improve or achieve their innovative projects. The more innovations is developed, the more environment is destroyed. In order to raise environmental awareness effectively, the process must start from the root. Children have curiosity in nature and always pay attention to their surroundings, so it is easier to start raising awareness among children. U. Sumathy writes in her book *Ecocriticism in Practice*, “It has been said that man does not inherit the world from his parents; he borrows it from is children. In order to ensure that, the world that is passed on to children is healthy one, man needs to preserve and protect the environment. In addition, he has to create awareness among children” (119). Raising awareness is one of the most tasks of ecocriticism. It is more effective to foster awareness from the roots. Ecocriticism has a very short history in the world of Children’s Literature. Karen Lensnik-Obsestein comments in her essay “Children’s Literature and Environment” as follows:

The tie between children and environment emerges primarily because John Locke's belief in the existence of a true nature in a child. Locke's implies that nature of child at once definable and real while it also mirrors the pure and simple nature of a child. This pairing of children and nature allows adult and parents and also writers for children to create a connection between the presence of nature and child's own understanding (215).

Children's literature and environmental criticism are well paired. If we wish to pass on a safe and healthy world to children then protection of environment will be the issue of immediate concern. Children's and Young Adult literature's role in regulating and reshaping adolescence has parallel associations with the literary construction of nature and our perceived relationship to it. Many Indian writers like Ruskin Bond, Ira Sexena, Deepak Dalal have written effectively on ecology for children. Indeed, wilderness settings have long been a strength of Indian adult fiction and no less so in our children's fiction. There are lot of environmentally and ecologically oriented information books available in Children's literature in English in India. The Indian environment, possibly due to the unique qualities of its flora, fauna, geological formations and extreme weather patterns has features as an integral part of Indian Children's literature. There has been a proliferation of environmentally themed children's books in India over the last few years of the twentieth century and in to the twenty first. We may say that increase in environmental thematic books published within last ten years has provided a rich source of texts for children and for research as well. The texts focus on an exploration of children's development as an ecological subject.

Deepak Dalal is one of the main writers of Indian Children's Literature today. He is a specialist on environment and wildlife. He has authored several adventure novels set in exotic locales of India. He aims at creating awareness for the environment at the grass root level by influencing young minds through his writing so that they are inspired to save our beautiful planet earth. The idea behind his writing is to create a connection between children and the 'wilderness areas' through the medium of adventure stories based in India. In one of the reviews of his novel on 'Buzzing Books' Sajad Girdar writes:

As he writes with refreshing candour. His writing reflects a love for nature and a spirit of adventure. Importantly, he tries to do all of his with stories set in the India, with Indian characters, which makes his books all the more special, being his dream of offering Indian children stories about their own people, in our beautiful country (1).

Talking to India Today, Deepak says,

Children's fiction has a purposeIt would be very easy to write an urban adventure. But essentially I want to set my books in all the exotic locales in India... Through these books, children could be at one

with the flora and fauna of the place - get the feeling of exploring some of the world's most beautiful coral reefs as in *Lakshadweep Adventure* or feel the thrill of a chase in the wildlife game sanctuary as in *Ranthambore*(Chowdhury)

The aim of my work is to attempt to create a connection between our children and our wilderness areas. Resorting to management jargon here, jargon that I believe appropriate in this context: I will say that my primary objective is to 'leverage' the medium of an adventure story. My intentions is to tap the powerful potency of a story, to kindle a love for wilderness in the reader; to spark a bond between children and the environment; to create in them a genuine desire to save and conserve that remains (Dalal76).

He is a fictional adventure writer who has written many interesting and famous books like, *Lakshadweep Adventure*, *Ranthambore Adventure*, *Ladakh Adventure*, *The Snow Leopard Adventure*, *Andaman Adventure — The Jarawa*, *Andaman Adventure — Barren Island* and *Sahyadri Adventure: Anirudh's Dream*.

Ranthambore Adventure(1998) is a thrilling adventure story of boys Vikram and Aditya who are considered as the 'Hardy Boys' of Deepak Dalal's Adventure series novels. Vikram Singh and Aditya Khan are two young boys, intelligent, sensitive and skilled at solving mysteries. *Ranthambore Adventure* also narrates the story of the tiger Genghis and Padmini. Packed with tiger-lore, it traces the moments of Genghis's life – from his birth as a feathery, helpless ball of fur, to his advent as a proud and authoritative predator. It begins with his birth and Genghis soon occupies a key place in the sequence of events. Dalal has succeeded in creating a great bond of empathy and concern for Genghis. He has created a bond, and the reader follows the tiger throughout the book. He skilfully created an atmosphere for child readers through his vivid description of the birth of two cubs in the very first chapter of the book:

The cubs were born sometimes during the cold season. On a chilly, misty morning, in a valley nestled between steep cliffs, the tigress choose a thick, leafy bush. As the sun climbed high and the mist dispersed, she gave birth to two squealing, whimpering balls of fur... the cubs did not open their eyes for a week...the cubs peered at the world around them with large, inquisitive eyes. The bush was alive with all forms of life (RA* 1).

Genghis's fight for survival in a poacher-ridden world is consumed with a sense of urgency, as from the very beginning his mother was aware of the poachers. She took many great precautions to avoid predators, especially those of the two-legged variety, "the tigress was aware that humans in jeeps posed no threat to either her or her family. She trusted humans

seated in vehicles, but humans on foot were another matter altogether” (RA 9). The narrative shifts then to two young boys namely Aditya Khan and Vikram. The story provides their young protagonists with a chance of redeeming the damage to the natural world that has been caused by the culture of humanity. The young adults in the novel are charged with the responsibility of recovering the damage which was caused by the poachers to tigers. Children like to see their heroes take on problems and situations which adults too will find difficult to handle. In the Harry Potter books, without any help from adults, Harry and his friends, handle very difficult situations. Children’s writing and their expectation from their readings have evolved. Lesnik – Oberstein suggests, “Through its identification with the natural, and with the fulfilment of its own future as the adult it must become... the tradition has been invoked of the child, innocent and pure of perception, as enlightener and redeemer of the adult” (213). The damage to the wildlife is brought to their notice through Vikram’s father Uncle Govind or Govindh Singh, who heads the Wilderness Conservation India (WCI) Aditya informs Aarti “There are all sorts of people who slaughter wildlife. Some do it for meat, which is forgivable, Uncle Govind says, if forced by hunger. Many hunt simply for fun, which he says is unpardonable, but the worst part offenders by far are those that kill for profit. That’s where ‘Wilderness Conservation India’ steps in.” (RA 15).

These children were curious to know about those who mutilate these forests and animals, and were stimulated when they heard words of Raveer who was Mr. Reddy’s (CFO Ranthambore National Park) deputy “the problem is that nobody cares. So what if few tigers die? So what if cattle graze in the forest? Who cares? The public doesn’t; the authorities don’t, and the judiciary ignores wildlife. No one is bothered! We forest officers often wonder why we take trouble. Why should Reddy *saab* risk his life if nobody is concerned? All has to do is turn a blind eye. Let the cows enter, a few tigers here and there – what does it matter? Certainly not worth dying for” (RA 83-84).

Dalal has developed an understanding for children, as he wanted to create an awareness among children and young adults. Most of the times children question, as Aditya asks, “What happened to that poacher you were after when I left? The man Uncle Govind called the master poacher. Did you capture him?” (RA 20). He further questions, “Why is this man free? Can’t you arrest him if you know he is a criminal? You said the man possess a ton of tiger bones. Isn’t that enough to put him away?” (RA 22). Mørch believes “that we need to inspire children and support their curiosity in all ways so that they themselves experience the urge to act, to be engaged and to care, be it about nature or literature” and “if their engagement is rooted in their own enthusiasm, it is sustainable” (RA 46). In one more opinion BittuSahgal. Editor, Sanctuary Asia magazine writes about *Ranthambore Adventure*:

I am convinced that books like *Ranthambore Adventure* will make a difference. They foster within children a much needed sympathy for wildlife. It is the young generation of today that will dictate the future of our forests and sanctuaries. Our task is to prime them correctively now and the story *Ranthambore Adventure*, in my opinion, is a valuable tool in this endeavour (RA cover page).

Out of this curiosity they come to know about the master of the poachers, Shankar Chand, who has killed more than fifty tigers, stocked and collected the bones from them and transported them to Chinese dealers at huge profits:

Chand hated the forest and all the creatures. He was descended from a princely family. One of his ancestors had single-handedly killed more than three hundred tigers in his lifetime. His father and grandfather had been great hunters too. But Chand was afraid of all forms of wildlife. He despised animals. His fear was deep-seated and irrational. His father had tried to help him overcome his terror. He had often dragged his reluctant young son into forests, along this same path. He had shown him the various denizens of Ranthambore's wild and beautiful world and had patiently explained that animals were scared of humans. Tigers, leopard, bear ... name any animal; large or small it mattered not, they all backed away from humans (RA 161).

It is was the effort and energy of these children; Aditya, Vikram and other young ones who caught the big fish, Shankar Chand, "Shankar Chand, the greatest poacher of them all, was lying in the grass, curled in a tight ball. His head was buried in his arms and even from the distance Vikram could see that his body was shaking.... Genghis had humbled the poacher. The tiger had won the encounter without even trying. Shankar Chand had passed out" (RA 167). Shankar Chand is based upon a real life character, Sansar Chand, Known to have joined the trade at the age of thirteen. Sansar was in headlines in most of the renowned papers and magazines of India as on *NDTV* in 2013' "Jailed for killing hundreds of tigers, Sansar Chand to walk free", *Times of India* "Sansar Chand, notorious tiger poacher, dead" *Indian Express*, "Cancer kills poacher Sansar Chand who wiped out Sariska tigers".

The novel ends with a big question whether these forests and animals would remain in peace, and would humans let them live in tranquillity, "Vikram looked at the cubs. The three young ones were playing without a care in the world, happy and content in the presence of their mother. If no one interfered in their lives, the animals would live. They would grow to be the future rulers of the forests. But would they be left alone...? Would the peace and

tranquillity of the forests remain...? Vikram had no answers. Only time would tell” (RA 173). In Deepak's own words:

Animals and birds are doubtless the main draw of a forest, but there is more. No forest experience is complete without absorbing the peace and tranquillity of a wilderness area. Imagine the absence of the rumble of traffic, of the bustle of humanity, of the drone of engines and motors that run our world. Take in instead the rustle of the wind through the trees, the call of birds and animals, and the serenity of a forest. Understand what primal human beings enjoyed and what cities and civilisation have robbed us of – the grandeur of nature(Sharma).

Dalal's stories are set in wilderness areas. Some of these wilderness zones are chosen as national parks and some aren't. Children who live in urban areas know little about hill areas and wilderness. The settings Dalal has selected help build a bond between children and ecology and environment. The stories generate love for wilderness areas amongst youngsters. Dalal says in an interview with, “I noticed that there are hardly any Indian writers in the adventure story space. To imbibe good adventure stories our children are forced to read books by foreign authors that are set in countries that are alien to them and that they might never visit. I thought this to be a shame, especially since India can be such a vibrant setting for stories, given its fabulous diversity in people and geography” (Khattar). He further adds,

I decided to use this wonderful canvas that is India as the backdrop for my stories. Accordingly, I have written books set in the Lakshadweep Islands; in the Andaman Islands, at Ranthambore, in Ladakh, and in the Sahyadri range of mountains (the Western Ghats). The aim here is that through my stories children can learn about India's fabulous destinations and its diverse peoples....I have carefully researched these stories and presented facts of what is happening to our wilderness areas to our children. In addition, I have also tried to communicate my deep love for Nature to my readers. Today, most of our children are born in cities and rarely travel beyond them. They know little about Nature and will probably see no reason to protect them when they grow older. My stories, in a sense, are an attempt to create a bond between children and wilderness areas (Khattar).

Analyzing above stories offer varying portraits of the Indian environment that tap into the idea of multiple perspectives of Indian histories, cultures, and environments. The authors exhibit how children are empowered to develop their identity, take solace, or validate their place in

the world through their presence and interaction with the natural environment. Nature functions in these novels as a sustaining force and educate the young ones. These stories depict physical movements from the historical lands, albeit in different directions and/or for different purposes for children.

- RA= *Ranthambore Adventure*

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