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Environmental Ethics in Zai Whitaker's *Andamans Boy*

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Abstract:

Stories fascinate, they inspire and fire children's imagination. No one knows where their influence stops. A child bred in a city or one nurtured in the countryside are equally influenced by strong narratives and therefore storytelling is a powerful tool for building values. Accordingly, ethics and the usefulness of a narrative in building an understanding of ethics also comes from the simple fact that storytelling engages like nothing else and therefore can definitely bring about fundamental and constructive change in children. They may not always be conscious of this transformation that narrative builds in their psyche. Nevertheless, it is the conscious understanding of an adult who sketches a narrative based on ethical understanding and thereby instils in the young a respect and regard for its environment. Given the kind of havoc inflicted by man on nature, it is time we did something to protect it. For this reason, nature education and its conservation should be introduced to the young at a very early stage. And what better way to do this than through storytelling. It is here that Zai Whitaker's contribution to literature as an environmentalist and a conservationist gains significance. Interestingly, all her works meant for children, speak of a better tomorrow that can be built through protecting the today. Nature and all its inhabitants living in harmony form the crux of her work. The present paper considers the work *Andamans Boy* in building awareness about issues of conserving nature and protecting the indigenous culture of the natives of Andaman threatened by the so called 'developers'.

Keywords: Eco-ethics, children, conservation, nature, indigenous culture.

Context

The term environmental ethics can simply be defined as a discipline in philosophy which studies the moral relationship of human beings to, the value and the moral status of, the surrounding and its non human contents. With the kind of havoc wrecked by man on his environment it becomes very pertinent that every effort should be made to stop and prevent further damage. Leading children by example would be the best way to build a sense of understanding and respect towards nature. It is in this context that stories can play an important role in making it easier for them to emulate the examples they see in the right role models. Generally, nature and images about nature are present widely in most of the literature meant for children. Although a reader may completely be oblivious of its meaning, nature in literature has more than an aesthetic significance. In fact, most of Whitaker's works rarely misses out on this accord. Nature is all pervading, an infinite being in all her works. More than an inanimate being, she is worshipped, cared for, played with, and even romanced in her work. Environmental issues provide a backdrop for her children's fiction in *Andamans Boy*. Being a patron of ecology and its inhabitants, issues of the Jarawa tribe of the Andaman—bred by the intervention of the so-called developed world—forms the crux of the

work. The present paper tries to examine how concern for nature and its conservation gets conveyed through the genre of children's adventure fiction.

Andamans Boy is the tale of a coming of age of a young helpless boy Arif, brought up in a loveless environment by his uncle and aunt who wait for him to turn 18 so they can filch his money. He seeks to escape his predicament and unwittingly ends up in a journey that leads him to the Andaman Island. This quest for freedom from his mercenary relatives leads him to a voyage of courage and endurance. It breeds in him the confidence to face the trials the real world offers. Having met and undergone the resolve to fight these challenges, he matures into a young adult who is not just able to fight for himself but also rescue the innocent Jarawas from the greedy 'developers'. They have devious schemes of turning the Andaman into a tourists' paradise so they can make hay while the sun shines. Subsequently, Arif lands in the lap of a virgin terrain that reflects nature in its resplendence and comes in contact with the natives; the Jarawas who know very little about the ways of the world. This work of adventure has a thought provoking environmental connection and strongly focuses on the need to respect, conserve and protect all its inhabitants. This paper intends to present how stories written for children generate ethical inquiry and address the grown up questions of faith and morality, good and evil in relation to the environment.

The power of stories

Children dream and live the stories they read. They have an amazingly rich imagination. Fantasies and stories give them access to many amazing things in life. There are millions of writers in this world who spend their entire lives dedicated to writing, taking risks on the page, thus unravelling the wonderful possibilities of life. When this final connection bonds into a rich understanding of what the writer wants to convey, there is a potential for transformation. Lives can be changed by story-telling.

As fittingly mentioned by O'Connor in *Mystery and Manners*, "A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way....You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate."¹

In light of the above quote we can say that although most children read stories out of interest and perceive them primarily as a source of entertainment, stories do transport their readers to unheard and unexplored lands and what is more, they serve as a vehicle to express ideas, a tool to teach and instruct, admonish and counsel. Children's fiction provides a wide scope and liberty to a writer to impress, mould and mentor the young impressionable minds. It has the power to take us to reality through illustrations which otherwise can be challenging.

Meanwhile, the predominant themes in Whitaker are nature, children, animals and love for, and conservation of, the environment. Although the protagonist Arif comes from a city with very little exposure to natural environment, like any child he too is adept at learning things out of books. He is fascinated with unknown lands and its inhabitants. We come to know this from his knowledge and interest in the subject geography. He is desirous of exploring the unknown and is bold enough to escape his lot, from the clutches of an unloving family.

This adventurous nature of the protagonist has the power to transport the young readers into a new world. As the social scientist Donna Eder implies,

"Fairy tales and fantasy stories transport the readers into *other worlds* that are fresh with wonder, surprise, and danger. They challenge the reader to make sense out of those *other worlds*, to navigate his way through them, and to imagine himself in the place of the heroes

and heroines. The safety and assurance of these imaginative adventures is that risks can be taken without having to endure all of the consequences of failure; the joy is in discovering how these risky adventures might eventuate in satisfactory and happy outcomes. Yet the concept of self is also transformed. The images and metaphors in these stories stay with the reader even when he has returned to the 'real' world."²

It is in this regard that Arif's adventure lends a strong example for the young reader about the possibilities and opportunities of difficult life situations. Arif appears to be a hero ready to risk his comfort zone and look for a better life. During this moral struggle for freedom it is not just he but also the helpless and naive natives who finally get deliverance from the clutches of the greedy invaders. Finally, the story unfolds to tell that the essence of life is in self-transformation and taking risks to stand up for what one believes in.

Nature and ethics for children

Children come in contact with nature from a very young age. Read-aloud stories in the form of picture books, fairy tales, adventure fiction, nonsense rhymes, all predominantly contain nature. Children identify with these make-believe world and characters as reality. To them a rabbit or a bear is no different from their own kind. They love and admire these creatures of nature as they love their own kind. Moreover, they have an innate sense and a keen understanding of ethics and justice. For them characters in a fairy tale or an adventure fiction are no less serious than the real people they see and know in their everyday lives. As Vigen Guroian rightly observes, "Mere instruction in morality is not sufficient to nurture the virtues....Instead, a compelling vision of the goodness of goodness itself needs to be presented in a way that is attractive and stirs the imagination....Stories are an irreplaceable medium of this kind of moral education. This is the education of character."³

This is why when they read about issues of violence against nature and people through stories; it leaves an indelible impression on their young minds. Their natural instinct desires the well-being and protection of the inhabitants of these tales. This sense of value for the living and its conservation therefore, marks the beginning of a life long journey towards ecological consciousness and its protection.

Comfort in Nature in *Andamans Boy*

The book intended for the young is a treasure trove for adventure lovers for two main reasons. Firstly, Andaman is not an island much explored in children's fiction. Secondly, the charcoal sketches and pencil drawings are an added attraction to the young minds as they supplement the description of the wild natural environs of the unknown land of Andamans. It also contains a host of captivating descriptions of the flora and fauna.

The opening chapter of the story provides a contrasting backdrop to the rest of the adventure Arif is about to assume; beginning with a city and ending in wild nature. Arif is like any other child curious about his environment. We find his compassion for wild creatures from his attitude and behaviour towards them. The wild and the uncanny "world of piranhas and manatees, wildebeest and warthogs" on the Discovery Channel fascinate him. (Whitaker 6)

Nature is not just a soothing companion for a boy who has lost his parents at a very young age but also becomes an inseparable part of his life in the forest. We see that when he is trying to escape from the clutches of his selfish uncle and aunt he dreams about his mother in the company of nature.

“In his dreams that night there were mountains and valleys, streams and lakes, and he and the mother were walking around slowly, his hand in hers. She carried a basket in which Arif collected for her special gifts of the earth: a clump of soft emerald moss, an orange and black tree frog with a wide grinning mouth, a river stone layered like two-flavoured ice-cream. The basket was almost full...” (Whitaker 24)

When he unwittingly ends up in the ship to the Andamans, we see his excitement in the adventure he is about to launch into.

“Coral reefs, mangrove forests, incredible numbers and varieties of fish and other strange marine animals and plants. And, absolutely the best, there were tribes who had never been contacted by outside people.” (Whitaker 28)

His journey to the Andamans is sprinkled with interesting encounters of the flora and fauna.

“Gulls and terns circled above, crying plaintively. When garbage was flung out from the ship they dived at it like arrows, catching food before it dissolved in the water. Sometimes two or even three birds fought for the same morsel...They had changed their habits to survive in their new environment of crowds and garbage.”(Whitaker 30)

Vivid details of natural beauty are present throughout the story.

“(Water) fell away in smooth silky folds as the ship forged ahead. There were different kinds of swirls and splashes and ripples to watch, each one special. An endless variety of form and colour, a feast for the eyes and the mind...” (Whitaker 38)

“Each part of the day brought its own pageant of colours and reflection. At night the water mirrored the moon and stars and tossed them around in its waves and ripples.” (Whitaker 38)

Arif feels blessed in the myriad opulence of nature. The beauty of the greenery around him leaves him breathless.

“Circling the green umbrella canopy was a startling belt of sand ---- coral sand, almost ice-white. Joining hands around the sand ring were the mangrove trees, funny stunted dwarves with long tangled arms which were their roots. They stood like squat sentinels in the water, the soft waves worrying their ankles. In the deeper waters were long inky blue patches. Coral reefs.” (Whitaker 47)

Close acquaintance with nature makes him wonder about the muck and filth that is the city Mumbai, where he comes from. In contrast the Andaman is rich in nature’s bounty and he finds more peace and comfort in his new abode. Clearly, Arif finds a soothing companion in nature. He is reassured by its regenerating power and respects its natural processes. “From now on I will look for comfort and love in these things: the ocean, the trees, the antics of gulls and terns. These things never go away, never let you down.” (Whitaker 39)

He enjoys the bounties of Mother Earth. He learns to fish in his first contact with the Jarawa boy. He exalts at the sight of dolphins and their calves during his adventure. Their glossy brown skins, long slim jaws, and bumpy heads bring extreme joy for this city bred boy.

He learns to be at home with all the birds and animals who give him the much valued company that he pines for at that moment. He has a baby parakeet, his ‘entire social life’. He has an abundant supply of food available at all times. The world of the ocean is brilliant and fascinating. There are pages and pages of interesting description about the sea and its

remarkable population. Arif reminisces the descriptions of these creatures he had learnt at school.

Compassion for Animals

Lynne Cherry a children's writer, nature artist and a passionate conservationist states in her interview

"I write for kids and know they can do a lot. Kids don't seem to practice denial as much as adults. When they hear about a problem they want to know what they can do about it and will write letters and raise funds. They have this boundless energy and more time than most adults. Kids keep me hopeful."⁴

Likewise, Arif, the hero of the story is a boy who is compassionate and wants to help. We see this fellow feeling in him on many occasions. Whilst he is like any other boy bred in the city, busy with his books and play, unlike boys who throw stones at strays he comes across as a sensitive boy for his age. We find him very lonely and his only companion is a gecko who he likes to feed. His aunt's repulsion for the reptile is evident of any adult's distaste for creepy crawlies. This does not deter him.

Sometime later in the story we come to see that he is affected by the way caged animals get treated. Cruelty towards them is unbearable to his soul. When he comes across a couple of goats transported in a cramped cage, he rescues them, feeds the poor creatures and takes care of them throughout the journey.

He is incredibly natural with the animals around him. Even the crocodiles don't scare him. When he unwittingly lands with them in a van transporting crocodiles, he endures the journey biting his lips. Eventually we come to know that he is appointed as a caretaker at the Wandoor zoo for his knack of dealing with them in such a short time. He grows intimate with the wild pig and the crab-eating monkeys, baby barn owls, and the parakeets too.

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge: Everything for Everyone

"Indigenous knowledge is the knowledge acquired by the local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments and intimate understanding of their environment in a given culture".⁵

They have an intimate understanding of the environment. Like the indigenous tribe, the Jarawas in the story, have a deep understanding of the environmental ethic. This is evident from their very attitude and values towards nature in the story. They may not be formally educated but their view of the value of natural environment is based on reasoning. They are averse to any outsiders who venture to fish or encroach on their lands. This does not happen because they are mean but they do this to protect the land from the outsiders who have been known to exploit their natural resources. Experience has taught them to be wary of these avaricious invaders. They treat their land with respect and never take more than what they need. This is perceptible from the abundance of natural resources available in the Andamans. Although the seas of the South Andaman has scant shark the Jarawa Reserve is teeming with them.

The fisherman Shomitra recognizes this and accepts that it is the mistake of the trespassers to break the law and plunder the resources of the Jarawa. He says, "It's their land, and they're dependent on it for food, water, medicines, everything. After all, when the Pakistanis cross our territory we fight them, don't we?" (Whitaker 44)

Arif learns that the other two native tribes the Onge and the Andamanese had fallen prey to diseases spread through contact with the outer world. This reminds him of the American Indian tribe from Brazil who had been wiped out in large numbers due to the common cold. This is also another reason the Jarawas resist contact with the foreign world.

They are in sync with the Biocentric principles of ecology. They understand what is best for nature. Nature should take her own path and humans should not disturb the natural processes. They have an inherent understanding of the rights of the animal kingdom. We see this in direct contrast with the anthropocentric ideas of the modern world which has no respect for the non-human species.

Ethics and Ecoethics in *Andamans Boy*

Hazel Rochman (1993) in her book *Against Borders*, explains the overall purpose of multicultural literature. She claims,

A good book can help to break down [barriers]. Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community: not with role models and literal recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others. A good story lets you know people as individuals in all their particularity and conflict; and once you see someone as a person - flawed, complex, striving - then you've reached beyond stereotype. Stories, writing them, telling them, sharing them, transforming them, enrich us and connect us and help us know each other.⁶

The book under consideration, works on this very philosophy of developing empathetic understanding towards the natives and their environment. It begins with a foreword which introduces its readers to the seldom heard about indigenous and native tribes of the Andamans like the Onge, the Sentinelese the Andamanese and the Shompen. Whitaker goes on to describe their unique understanding and instinct to preserve whatever comes from the natural habitat. The author's connection with the Jarawas goes much beyond the physical realm: it reaches the spiritual plane of her identifying with the natives who are in harmony with nature. She does this by comparing the indigenous lifestyle of the native with that of apathy of the modern man towards nature to appeal to their conscience and thus create a better model for them to emulate. This may not actually work for the plot as it weakens the suspense in the story targeted towards the young readers who approach it as any adventure fiction. But the fact remains that this foreword prepares the young readers to regard the work not just as any adventure fiction but also as a guide to a world of the indigenous which hardly gets any mention in their social studies or any other subject of formal study for that matter. The entire story alludes to prove this notion. Issues of overfishing, extinction of species, invasion of the indigenous culture, and the perversities of the outside world get much prominence in the story.

We come across the grim reality of overfishing that leads to extinction of species. Like the shark fisherman Shomitra who talks about the shark industry coming up in a big way in the South Andaman islands. The waters there do not have any shark left and even after trying for hours together they do not catch anything.

We see that Arif is very careful not to interrupt or harm the island and its natives in any way. He meets the Jarawa boy for the first time in the Jarawa island. All the stories he had heard about them being 'hostile and uncivilized' makes him apprehensive. But as soon as they share whatever they can with gestures and sounds, he realizes that all his inhibitions were only a wrong impression, the so called civilized world has about the indigenous.

Not very long after that Arif is mistaken for the infiltrators called as 'ghosts', who have destroyed their islands in the past. He confronts them and is protected by the Jarawa boy Eetha Aleho who becomes the interpreter for Arif. Arif learns that the people from the Jarawa island knew that "(the South Andaman's) population had fallen from four thousand to practically zero in fifty years because of contact with the outside world. Its diseases, its alcohol and, most important, as a man on the ship had said, misery and confusion from losing their land, their culture, their identity." (Whitaker 115)

Their sound sense of justice makes the story richer by values. Although the Jarawa are not formally educated they have a deep understanding about the needs of women in their families. Like we see that the pregnant woman Natalang gets a larger and choicest share of the food. They are empathetic towards everyone and do not understand the worldly ways of the modern world. For instance they do not have words like 'stealing', 'begging', 'money' present in their language for the simple reason that they do not understand these twisted and materialistic ideas. Their simple minds are utterly incapable of making sense of the perverse world. "When they wanted something they just took it. Everything belonged to everyone." (Whitaker 127) "(Arif) could see why they didn't—couldn't—understand the danger. The tricks and games of 'civilization'—hypocrisy, back-stabbing—these were not part of their lives at all. That people could give you gifts, and smile at you with bad thoughts in their hearts. This madness of the outside world they could not understand or believe." (Whitaker 139)

There are accounts of the extinction of the Onge tribe of the Little Andaman due to the invasion of foreigners. The 'ghost' people try to lure them with 'gifts', materials from the outside world like matches, plastic buckets, and colourful red cloth. Certain worldly things were incomprehensible to their simple minds. Like, the vested interest of the people from the outside world for making fast money by attracting the tourists into these untouched green lands and plundering the rich resources. Some of these government officials have petty self-interest like their ensuing promotions if they assist the government in their skewed strategy.

The story ends on an optimistic note though. Finally, like a warrior, Arif helps the Jarawas see through the enemy's devious plans and helps them devise an ambush on the greedy invaders. Interestingly, the Indian Prime Minister too is tricked into believing that the natives have volunteered to welcome the invaders. Upon realizing the devious scheme of the government officials, the PM is aghast and threatens the greedy officials, "No more interference. No more encroachment. I shall be laying down some pretty firm laws, and those who break them, however high their position will be--- prosecuted." (Whitaker 145)

Conclusion:

Donna Norton (2010) very succinctly identifies the value of literature for young people in her book *Through the Eyes of a Child*. She concludes that children's literature helps in multiple ways. Firstly, it helps in "developing positive attitudes toward our own culture and the cultures of others is necessary for both social and personal development"⁷ (Norton 3) Secondly, it "contains numerous moments of crisis, when characters make moral decisions and contemplate the reasons for their decisions,"⁸ (Norton 34) Thirdly, children's literature also encourages creativity. She stresses "the role that literature plays in nurturing and expanding the imagination"⁹ (Norton 4) And, finally, being able to understand other people's viewpoints and to not be selfish are important skills that adults must nurture in children, as she says that "acceptable relationships require an understanding of the feelings and

viewpoints of others”¹⁰ (Norton 27) This understanding and empathy for the other is the value *Andamans Boy*, succeeds in putting forth plausibly.

So to conclude we can say that the world we live in is not simple. Wars of the good over evil do not work like the conflict between Voldemort versus Dumbledore. It is more complicated and therefore makes you rethink things. This is why books that end with questions are the most valued as children’s literature. They inspire rather than sounding didactical. It is in this regard that *Andamans Boy* poses questions that can make any young soul rethink the inhuman treatment doled out to the not so refined and weak of the world. After all, children hold the hope for a better tomorrow. Although we know that the damage done to our home, the planet Earth is irreversible, we can still hope to prevent further damage. Stories told and untold hold the key to creating a sensitive and humane world that values the environment and what it holds. As the great conservationist Rachel Carson so thought provokingly pronounces, “The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.”¹¹ So, let human imagination hold the key to creating such a world through stories and literature.

Notes:

¹ O’Connor, Flannery *Mystery and Manners* New York: Farrer, Strausand Giroux 1990, pg 96

² Eder Donna and Cajet Gregory *Life Lessons Through Story-telling: Children’s Exploration of Ethics*, Sept 6, 2010

³ Guroian Vigen *Awakening the Moral Imagination: Teaching Virtues Through Fairy Tales*. The Intercollegiate Review (Fall, 1996)

⁴ www.generationgreen.org/Lynn%20Cherry.htm. 15/7/14

⁵ Rajasekaran, B. and D.M. Warren. 1993. "Indigenous Rice Taxonomies and Farmers' Rice Production Decision-Making Systems in South India." In D.M. Warren, D. Brokensha, and L.J. Slikkerveer, (Eds.), Indigenous Knowledge Systems: The Cultural Dimensions of Development. London: Kegan Paul International.

⁶ Rochman, H. *Against Borders: Promoting Books for a Multicultural World*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association. 1993

⁷ Norton, D., & Norton, S, *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children’s Literature* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Prentice-Hall. 2010

⁸ _____ *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children’s Literature* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Prentice-Hall.

⁹ _____ *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children’s Literature* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Prentice-Hall.

¹⁰ _____ *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children’s Literature* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Prentice-Hall.

¹¹ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/15332.Rachel_Carson

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