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Environmental Literacy in Children’s Literature: An Analysis of Eva Ibbotson’s *Journey to the River Sea*

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Abstract:

Literary works are often educative in nature. They can simulate alternative worlds to warn the readers of impending catastrophes that await them, should they continue with their reckless ways. Children’s Literature in particular plays a very important role in instructing young minds. The current paper looks at ecocritical concerns in Eva Ibbotson’s *Journey to the River Sea*, and grapples with its efficacy in educating eager readers. Set in the Amazon, in the year 1910, the narrative presents two contrasting worlds: one of the Carters who despite having lived in the Amazon for several years, are reluctant to embrace the beauty and the wonders of their natural environment, and the other of the Amazonian Indians, as well as those who appreciate their ways, the most prominent among them being the ten-year old protagonist Maia, her governess Miss Minton, and Finn.

Keywords: Environmental education, Children’s Literature, Nature.

Introduction

Literary narratives have served to mirror the society, through the means of *mimesis*, and by voicing pertinent concerns and grappling with issues like race, class, caste, gender, and sexuality, to name a few. Yet another concern that has gained unprecedented urgency today is environment. Human intervention into the natural environment is the lived reality of the twenty-first century, and there is an urgent need to educate the readers, including children, on this pressing concern.

Children’s Literature carries within the margins of its pages, the prerogative to teach and influence the children. Britannica defines Children’s Literature as: “the body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people” (Fadiman “Children’s Literature”). Children’s Literature plays an important role in sensitizing our young

generation. Today, we need our children to respect plurality, we teach them to be fair, kind, and inclusive. For example, not only do we teach our daughters to be strong, we also teach our sons to respect their female counterparts. Children's Literature goes a long way in educating young, eager minds. Commenting on the efficacy of children's literature, Martha Crippen writes:

Children's literature is important because it provides students with opportunities to respond to literature; it gives students appreciation about their own cultural heritage as well as those of others; it helps students develop emotional intelligence and creativity; it nurtures growth and development of the student's personality and social skills; and it transmits important literature and themes from one generation to the next. (Crippen "The Value of Children's Literature")

It is evident that children's literature is often educative in nature. Further, education to children is imparted through various means, and literary narratives are one such medium, constituting informal education. Recognizing the need for non-formal and informal education, together with formal education, the European Youth Council defines informal education as:

Informal education refers to a lifelong learning process, whereby each individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from the educational influences and resources in his or her own environment and from daily experience. People learn from family and neighbours, in the market place, at the library, at art exhibitions, at work and through playing, reading and sports activities. The mass media are a very important medium for informal education, for instance through plays and film, music and songs, televised debates and documentaries. Learning in this way is often unplanned and unstructured. (European Youth Council "Informal Education")

This definition clearly delineates the need for cultural and literary motifs towards creating awareness regarding various societal issues, as well as, environmental issues. Literary narratives play a pertinent role in this. This field of inquiry that sees intersection between literature and environment has come to be established as ecocriticism. This "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii), seeks to educate the readers on the perils of human intervention into nature. It also looks at relationships established between gender and nature. Sherry B. Ortner's "Is Female is to Male What Nature is to Culture?" clearly elucidates this by emphasizing that female is likened to nature because of her reproductive role,

and is thus expected to be confined to domesticity. She is also seen as “closer to nature than men” (73). Also included in this inquiry is the relationship between the natives and their land, as opposed to the relationship of the colonizing masters with the colonized land. Ecocriticism is not only popular but also very pertinent. Reiterating the pervasiveness of this inquiry, Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber write:

Recent ecocriticism scrutinizes more intensively the relationships between imperialism and ecological distress within the literatures not only of Europe and Anglo North America, but also of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This increased attention to non-Western literature’s engagement with both local ecological concerns and global environmental issues, including toxification, climate change, and environmental injustice, has focused on a wide array of creative landscapes on every continent. (427)

Within the purview of an ecological inquiry into literature, we have the literary narratives that overtly seek to highlight the problematic relationship between humans and nature, and the inherent anthropocentrism that defines our relationship with nature. Also included within this is a critical inquiry into those narratives that see human subjugation of the environment as natural and inevitable. By offering a critique of these narratives, the critics seek to raise ecological consciousness in the readers. Yet another method employed by the creative writers is creation of alternative worlds. *Herland* (1972) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and *Ecotopia* (1975) by Ernest Callenbach constitute few such early examples. However, what Eva Ibbotson does in her narrative, is to simply present two different worlds co-existing, but oppositional to each other.

Discussion

The current paper focuses on Children’s Literature, and delves into the possibility of raising environmental consciousness in children by systematically analysing Ibbotson’s 2001 narrative, *Journey to the River Sea*. Set primarily in Manaus, Brazil, the novel takes us into the journey of ten years old orphan, Maia who had been studying in The Mayfair Academy for Young Ladies in London.

The narrative opens in the year 1910, when after having lost her parents two years ago, Maia is informed by her guardian that her newly-found relatives in Brazil have agreed to take her in. Maia travels from England to Brazil with her recently appointed governess, Miss Minton, a

middle aged, single woman with a stern exterior hiding a compassionate heart. When Maia learns about this new arrangement, she is eager and excited. Her Geography teacher at the Academy asks the entire class to read about the Amazon, and while Maia “read about brilliantly coloured birds [, ,] and curtains of sweetly scented orchids trailing from the trees” (6), her classmates warn her of “huge crocodiles in the rivers that can snap your head off in one bite” (7). It is quite evident that Maia carries an open-minded excitement, which her friends at the academy lacked. This itself presages Maia's relationship with the Amazon. As the narrative shall progress, we will see that Maia found a home in the Amazon.

This is in stark contrast to Maia's foster family, which had already been living in the Amazon for several years. Maia's foster family in Manaus comprises of the Carters and their twin daughters, Beatrice and Gwendolyn. Right from the beginning, Ibbotson has created the Carters' civilized and conservative ways as a foil to Maia's adventurous and exploratory spirit. When Maia is first informed about the twins, she is as eager and excited to meet them, just as she is to undertake the journey down the Amazon. Regarding her journey down the Amazon, Ibbotson writes:

The journey down the Amazon was one that Maia never forgot. In places the river was so wide that she understood why it was called the River Sea and they [Maia and Miss Minton] sailed between distant lines of trees. But sometimes they made their way between islands and then, on the sandbanks, they saw some of the creatures that Maia had read about. Once a litter of capybaras lumbered after their mother and they were close enough to see their funny snouts and sandy fur. (22)

To Maia, the Amazon was a world that she was ready to embrace with eager arms. As she reaches Manaus, she is overjoyed by the sight of the twins standing on the banks. Ibbotson writes,

She was becoming more and more excited. The colour, the friendly waving Indians, the flashing birds, all delighted her, and she was not troubled by the heat. But at the centre of all her thoughts were the twins. She saw them in white dresses with coloured sashes like pictures in a book, laughing and welcoming and friendly. (23)

But Maia was in for a sad surprise because the Carters, including the twins, were neither excited about the Amazon, nor about Maia's arrival. Although they had been living in Manaus, the twins never went outdoors. They wore fluffy taffeta dresses and set their hair up in curled ringlets.

Not only this, all local fruits and vegetables were banned from their dinner table. The twins only ate tinned food imported from England! As for Mrs. Carter, she proudly announced to Maia, “You will never find Native Food served at my table [. . .]” (32). Ibbotson writes:

When the Carters first came to England, their servants had cooked all the best dishes that were eaten in Brazil: freshly caught fish served in a saffron sauce, sweet peppers stuffed with raisins and rice, roasted sweetcorn and chunky soups. They had picked fresh fruit for the Carters: mangoes and guavas and pomegranates, and had gone out at night to search for turtle eggs. (36)

But in rejecting the local cuisine, the Carters’ also rejected the chance to establish a meaningful relationship with the Indians. One’s relationship with food has an intimate connection with one’s connection with the land on which it is produced, and the people who have produced it. The British in Brazil were colonizers. The Carters had purchased the house that they lived in from the Indians, and had failed to meet the terms and conditions of the land. There is a double displacement of the Natives as they are made to forfeit their land, and then serve as servants in Carters’ household. Not only this, the food produced by them has no place on the Carters’ table. This is a gross violation of the rights of the natives. The natives are stripped off of their land, and their mannerisms and food habits are ridiculed. Ariana Keyman writes in this regard:

Most of the poorest and most food-insecure people in the world share three characteristics: they live in rural areas, rely on agricultural labour to survive, and do not own the land that they cultivate. This state of crisis across the rural world of the Global South finds its historical origins in colonial land grabs, where existing forms of land tenure were either ignored or overridden. This resulted in farming communities, who relied on subsistence agriculture for their food, being stripped of their ownership and agency over their land, leading to their continuous displacement in to increasingly marginal, infertile lands such as desert margins, rocky slopes, and rainforests. (Keyman “Drawing Links Between Food Security and Land Rights in an Era of Globalization”)

This ecological relationship between the land and the natives, and the poor treatment meted out to them by the Carters shall be dealt in detail subsequently. Meanwhile, we return our attention to Mrs Carter.

Mrs. Carter had germaphobia. She and her house constantly smelled of Lysol. Addressing Maia, she says, "We disinfect everything in any case, but it doesn't help. The Indians are filthy. And if one is to survive out here, *the jungle must be kept at bay*" (emphasis in original, 32). It is clear that the twins are living their life completely alienated from their natural environment. They take dance classes, go to theatre, but fail to invite nature into their lives, fail in establishing a meaningful relationship with their environment. When Maia asks the twins if they had any pets, she is told, "No, we certainly don't have any pets. [. . .] Pets bring in fleas and lice and jiggers" (33). It is clear that the twins are paranoid about all things natural. Prior to coming to the Amazon, Mr and Mrs Carter had been living in Amazon where Mr Carter worked in a bank. When he had lost his job, he decided to try his hand at a plantation in Manaus. He did not treat his native workers well, and many had already left him.

The Carters' relationship with Brazil and with the natives was a fractured one. Just as the twins are a foil to Maia, Mrs. Carter is a foil to Miss Minton. As Miss Minton and Maia were sailing down the Amazon, "It occurred to Maia that Miss Minton knew quite a lot about the creatures they came across along the river" (24). Not only this, Miss Minton encourages Maia to explore subjects other than English and English History, and even supports her urge to be one with nature. Miss Minton is the epitome of individualism and rebellion. When she is employed by the Carters, she is strictly warned against removing her corset. However, as the plot progresses, we see Miss Minton doing exactly that, when she goes down the river with Finn, son of her childhood friend Bernard Taverner. Interestingly, it was Miss Minton, once a house-help in England, who had encouraged a young Bernard to leave his estate, Westwood, and travel south to become a naturalist.

Mr Carter owned a rubber plantation, and to run it he needed the Indians. However, Mr Carter was a poor pay master. He did not treat the Indians well. Even the twins did not treat Furo, Tapi, and Leela, the three Indians living in their outhouse well. Ibbotson writes that every month Mr Carter had lost some of his workforce, because of his ill-dealings with the Indians. She writes:

And certainly a lot of people had made their fortunes. There were people in Manaus who lived like princes. But not the Carters. Because to get the juice from the rubber trees you need Indians who know the forest and understand the trees. And Indians are proud people

who have their own lives. If you treat them like slaves they don't revolt or go on strike; they simply melt back into the forest, join their tribes and disappear. (39)

The Indians, according to Ibbotson, are like an extension of the forest, deeply connected to the land they till, and from which they derive their resources. Their ways are “unhurried, easy” (73). This is in stark contrast to the way the Carters lived. Mrs Carter was constantly paranoid about germs, carrying with her flit, like one carries a lapdog. As for Mr Carter, he was downright cruel with the Indians. In fact, one time Maia fell sick when she saw an Indian being “flogged” at Mr Carter's orders.

As Maia continues to explore the rainforest, she makes two important friends, Clovis, whom she had met on the ship to Brazil, and Finn, Bernard Taverner's son. Maia gets a closer look into the world of the Indians as she travels with Finn to the Xanti tribe, the tribe to which Finn's mother belonged. Finn's mother had died while giving birth to Finn, as “the English doctor wouldn't come out to Indian woman in the night [. . .]” (106). This was the reason why Finn did not want to go back to Westwood, even when his grandfather Sir Aubrey Taverner was fervently looking for him.

Just like Maia, Bernard Taverner had been different from other English men. He had been brought up in Westwood. And while his older brother Dudley was “arrogant and snooty” (128), and always screamed and shouted at the servants, Bernard was always polite, always adding please or thank you when talking to the servants. If one considers basic human values, this portraiture of Bernard is also an exercise in education. Where colonization is one end of the spectrum, lying somewhere on the same spectrum is ill-treatment of servants. According to a report in *Business Standard*, which refers to the case of India, “Unless there is a major story worth the coverage, domestic workers are seldom talked about” (Tewari “Why is the condition of domestic workers seldom discussed in India?”). Sadly, such is the case across the globe. Thus, by pointing out towards the mistreatment of workers, Ibbotson is tackling the dual issues of ecology and human rights.

When Maia reaches the Xanti tribe with Finn, she is pleasantly surprised by their casual and sunny ways. Finn tells this to Maia about the Xantis: “My father said they were the kindest people he'd ever met. And they knew everything there was to know about healing” (201). The Xantis welcomed Maia with open arms. Ibbotson describes the Xanti village thus:

The Xanti village was not the dark huddle of huts in the gloom of the forest that Maia had expected. It was in a clearing open to the sky. At night they [the Xantis] could see the Southern Cross, and stars so bright they seemed unreal, and by the day the sun shone down on the compound where the children played and animals wandered. (276)

The Xantis lived in harmony with nature. They did not resist nature like the Carters did. The children swam in clear pools of water. All the children had some or other animal as pet, once again, much unlike the twins who had an attitude of phobia towards the pets. After breakfast, the women usually made baskets or wove hammocks. The European outlook towards life can be well contrasted with those of the Xantis, and it can be succinctly summarized in the following statement made by Maia: "You know I told you what my father said you had to do, 'seize the day', [. . .] Well, it seems to me there's no point in doing that here. You don't have to seize it. They *give* you the day" (emphasis in original 278). The Xantis lived to enjoy every moment of their life in tandem with nature, their lives free from all kinds of mad rush.

Conclusion

In her phenomenal book for children, Ibbotson has created a contrast between European way of thinking and the natives' understanding of their land and environment. The ecocritical concerns can be seen on multiple levels. To begin with, the writer has presented a comparative analysis of the lifestyles lived by the Carters, and those lived by the natives, as well as by those like Maia and Miss Minton who had an openminded attitude towards what the Amazon had to offer. In the Xantis we see a tribe living in symbiosis with nature. Today, we live in the Anthropocene, an epoch grossly altered by human intervention into nature. The term "Symbiocene" has been coined by Glen Albrecht in 2011 to suggest a spatio-temporal reality in which humans are able to live in harmony with nature. What is suggested here is that we don't necessarily need to enter another epoch to establish a synergetic relationship with nature, rather, that awaits us, if only we are able to bring about a shift in our priorities. Albrecht writes: "Symbiosis' implies living together for mutual benefit, and this new era should become a period in Earth history in which there is a deep interconnectedness of all life on Earth, including humans" (Albrecht "Exiting the Anthropocene and entering the Symbiocene"). Symbiocene need not necessarily mean entering a new era or entering a new spatio-temporal reality. It simply means having a new perspective, and a new appreciation for the ways long forgotten.

Children's literature has been very successful in educating the young readers. A narrative like *Journey to the River Sea* not only offers hope but also delves into the possibility of adopting alternative lifestyles which are more congruent with earth's future. In that sense, the narrative is utopian in nature, as opposed to another work of children's literature, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. In this narrative Lowry paints a dismal picture of a society completely controlled and governed by scientific principles of utilitarianism. However, what Ibbotson does is that she presents two different mindsets and two different modes of living in one narrative, and in many ways, the reader is free to choose one over another. For example, while Finn never wanted to return to Westwood, England, returning to England was Clovis' dream ever since he embarked on the journey to the Amazon. Here, Ibbotson is careful not to include any bias.

And Clovis does return, and does reunite with his foster-mother. Although he has to lie to do so, Ibbotson, in a move of compassion, completely presents this lie as a harmless necessity. It is clear that Ibbotson is not didactic in her approach, but rather genial. Although her leanings towards a life in the Amazon are clear, she also makes room for other lifestyles, like that of Clovis.

In conclusion, Children's Literature can educate young minds, just as they delight, a dictum given by John Dryden in the 17th century. We need to expose our children to such narratives that question heterogenous stances like patriarchy, racism, anthropocentrism, etc. Ibbotson's *Journey to the River Sea* is one such successful narrative that infuses in its young readers, a spirit of exploration and adventure, all the while giving them a chance to appreciate the wonders of the natural world.

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