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## Growing with Green Literature: Inspiring Young Minds with Ruskin Bond & Manjula Padmanabhan

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### Abstract

The world is facing terrible ecological catastrophes at the turn of the millennium. So, it is no longer a choice but a necessity to raise ecologically responsible children, as we are passing on a fractured environment to future generations. People often observe a twofold interaction between children and nature. According to one perspective, as William Wordsworth portrays, children are full of innocence and have a special bond with nature. In contrast to this perspective, John Locke's theory of *tabula rasa* contends that children lack knowledge and experience. Thus, elders are accountable for keeping them aware of their surroundings. This paper explores the importance of instilling eco-consciousness in children early on through eco-writing. It also examines how, by using stories and picture books, children can attain greater insight into the interconnectedness of their lives with their surroundings. The findings suggest that, through storytelling, children can comprehend more fully the relationships between themselves and others, as well as nature and society. For younger readers who are not yet able to grasp complex plotlines, it is also proposed that picture books can be used to develop these connections. This research delves into specific works of children's literature by Ruskin Bond and Manjula Padmanabhan, in which they convey their exceptional affinity with nature. By recognising the importance of eco-literature, this study looks to provide a model for a more sustainable approach to living, which can potentially shape the future of humanity and the planet.

*Keywords:* Ecological catastrophes, *tabula rasa*, eco-consciousness, children's literature, eco-literature, sustainable approach

### Introduction

For thousands of years, nature and its resources have been worshipped in India and deemed superior to humans. However, this adoration seems to have dwindled in the 21st century. It is undeniable that our environment has endured significant damage due to the over-exploitation of natural resources, climate change, the decline in biodiversity, soil erosion, and deterioration of water quality. That is why educating children to be environmentally conscious is crucial to understand their responsibility and to protect the environment for future generations. Unfortunately, children today are growing up in a highly urbanised and technologically advanced world, making it challenging to feel connected to nature. Therefore, parents and educators must devise creative ways to restore the lost connection between children and the natural world and teach them to respect nature. By doing so, children can learn to appreciate the beauty of nature and understand how to protect and preserve it.

Ecocriticism has emerged as a significant field of inquiry in recent years, drawing heavily from Western ecocritical frameworks. However, it is essential to note that this field also has roots in ancient Indian philosophies and scriptures. The classical writings and Upanishads of ancient India contain several ecocritical principles, such as a deep reverence for nature, a commitment to its care, and a focus on its preservation and sustenance. A notable contribution to this body of work is the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* stories, which have effectively promoted eco-consciousness among children and adults. “Animal fables from this source are predominant and remain just a grandmother away,” writes A.K. Ramanujam. (Ramaswamy 16).

“Eco-literacy, according to Wikipedia, is the ability to understand the natural systems that make life on earth possible.” In addition, it encourages us to consider the implications of our actions on the natural environment and to strive for balance in our relationship with the natural world. Achieving eco-literacy involves bringing a conscious attitude towards the environment, thereby protecting it consciously due to their knowledge of the environment.

### **Exploring the Interconnectedness of Nature and Children**

As per the research conducted in the book titled “Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociocultural, and Evolutionary

Investigations”, it is essential for the healthy development of a child to experience nature firsthand, as no other activity can replace this unique and valuable exposure. Studies indicate that children choose the natural surroundings closest to them as their preferred playground throughout history. This could range from a dense thicket in their backyard to a flowing stream or nearby forested area. The majority of kids were playing in the untamed nature on the outskirts of farms and fields during the day. They were free to play, discover, and interact with the natural world without being restricted or supervised. Sadly, this has changed, with modern play environments often designed around the concepts of structure and control rather than exploration and discovery. Researchers have identified the abrupt shift in children’s lifestyle and decreased outdoor playtime as “a childhood of imprisonment”. According to Pyle, this is the ‘extinction of experience,’ which develops indifference to environmental issues (Pyle 305-327).

People often observe a twofold interaction between children and nature. The prevalent belief among individuals is that children, as portrayed in William Wordsworth’s “Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” exhibit an untainted purity and an exceptional affiliation with the natural world. The poet himself alluded to his youthful meanderings. Wordsworth pens down,

“There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream” (lines 4-8).

Others, following John Locke’s *tabula rasa* theory, believe that children lack knowledge and experience, and it is the responsibility of adults to keep them aware of their surroundings. Regardless of which perspective is correct, this study aims to reveal the value of fostering eco-consciousness in children at a young age through eco-writing. It focuses on the best ways to utilise picture books and stories to educate children about significant environmental concerns and to better understand how closely linked their lives are to their surroundings. This study examines the efficacy of employing picture books and storybooks designed to convey complex ecological ideas in

teaching young children about eco-literacy. It also looks at specific works of children's literature by Ruskin Bond and Manjula Padmanabhan in which they showcase their exceptional affinity with nature.

### **Navigating the Challenges of Environmental Education**

Environmental education often focuses solely on adults and fails to recognise children's curiosity and unique learning styles. This calls for a teaching approach that encourages exploration and hands-on learning rather than a lecture-based method. Direct teaching approaches may not be the most effective method for young learners, leading to confusion and anxiety, especially when they are presented with complex environmental issues beyond their understanding. It is essential to consider age-appropriate lessons, as middle school students may be ready to study topics like rainforest loss and ozone depletion. In contrast, younger students may still need to prepare for these lessons. Careful consideration must be taken to avoid the development of ecophobia, fear or aversion to the natural world, and ecological concerns. Love and knowledge, according to John Burroughs, are inextricably linked; without love, knowledge is frail and transitory, likely to crumble into dust. Knowledge can only genuinely thrive and take root in hearts and thoughts when love is the cornerstone of learning. However, regrettably, environmental education programmes often prioritise knowledge and responsibility above cultivating a loving relationship with the natural world. David Sobel claims that before being burdened with the task of protecting the planet, it is vital for youngsters to acquire a love and regard for it (Sobel 5-10).

### **Love for Nature: Nurturing Young Minds through Picture Books**

"What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?" Alice asks in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Pictures have a newfound relevance in modern society thanks to the influence of visual media. Typically, the presence of illustrations is far more crucial than the presence of words. Even before toddlers can talk, they are receptive to images. Using picture books in early education can provide students with multimodal learning opportunities. Studies have shown that early exposure to picture books stimulates cognitive

development in young children. Through juxtaposing pictures and words, young learners are engaged and challenged to acquire knowledge in various ways. Initially targeted towards children, picture books have expanded their reach to include upper elementary and middle school students due to their vivid illustrations, rich and evocative language, and poignant and meaningful themes. They can stir our emotions, please our senses, awaken our imagination, and evoke memories of our past. They invite us to snuggle up and enjoy reading them.

According to Sobel (1996), in addition to frequent exposure to nature, encouraging children's interactions with animals is one of the most effective strategies to promote empathy in their early years. Surprisingly, studies have revealed that up to 80% of children under six dream about animals (Acuff and Patterson 174). The use of picture books can effectively promote awareness about animals. This is especially crucial as a growing disconnect exists between humans and nature. The children's picture book *Mama, What is the Night?* by Manjula Padmanabhan is a captivating exploration of the behaviours of nocturnal creatures, from the tiny firefly to the owl, and it immerses readers in a world of facts, that reveals the hidden beauty of the night, all while showing off a stunning array of illustrations. It is a captivating work that captures the enigmatic and mystical ambiance of the night through its vivid illustrations. Complementing the visual appeal, the accompanying text offers intriguing insights into the world of nocturnal animals and the night-blooming cereus. The book presents an engaging narrative that seamlessly blends scientific facts with artistic expression. Padmanabhan's book combines science, art, and poetry to create a unique and magical experience that can stimulate concern for other living creatures and a sense of commitment in young readers. Through vivid imagery and poetic language, *Mama, What is the Night?* offers a valuable contribution to the realm of children's literature, promoting empathy with the understanding of the natural world.

### **Unlocking the Potential of Storybooks: A Pathway to Sustainability**

According to a recent study published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, children tend to prefer storybooks that provide more causal

information (McKnight 10-15). The genre of children's literature possesses a unique ability to influence the perspective of juvenile audiences through the narratives it conveys. Ruskin Bond's stories shed light on the connection between children and nature and the influence of nature on people of all ages. These stories demonstrate how outdoor experiences can shape one's personality and character development. In his short story "How Far Is the River", one can observe the themes of curiosity, exploration, and appreciation for the natural world. The story digs into the protagonist's psyche, a 12-year-old boy's intense desire to explore nature, to discover the beauty and secrets of the river hidden by the mountain since he had never had the opportunity to experience it himself. Driven by curiosity, he ventured into the unknown, determined to find the river and experience, appreciate its beauty, and 'know it personally'. Additionally, the boy's preference for being barefoot highlights the importance of connecting with nature and enjoying the small joys in life. The sensation of nature beneath his feet, combined with the ease of not removing his shoes, helps him connect to the environment around him more meaningfully. As he grows up, he will likely continue to appreciate the small things in life.

"I was barefooted; not because I couldn't afford shoes, but because I felt free with my feet bare, because I liked the feel of warm stones and cool grass because not wearing shoes saved me the trouble of taking them off" (Bond 62).

The sensation of nature beneath his feet, combined with the ease of not removing his shoes, helps him connect to the environment around him more meaningfully. The story promotes appreciating and exploring nature instead of relying solely on technology for entertainment, such as televisions, computers, and electronic devices. This instills a long-lasting love for the natural world and a heightened awareness of our surroundings, leading to a greater appreciation for the environment. By cultivating reverence for nature, these values can be imparted to future generations and contribute to our planet's health and vitality.

In Ruskin Bond's other short story, "A New Flower", the protagonist, Usha, is a nine-year-old girl who discovers a rare flower and shows the narrator who had been wandering among Mussoorie's hills. She insists on plucking it for her friend, but he resists and

encourages her to appreciate its beauty without taking it away from its natural environment. “No, I don’t, I said. It may be the only one. If we break it, there may not be anymore. Let’s leave it there and see if it seeds” (35). This promotes eco-consciousness in children by teaching them that nature should be respected and appreciated rather than taken or destroyed. The story also emphasises the importance of preserving biodiversity and protecting endangered species. By showing how even one small act can impact the environment, this story helps instill eco-friendly values in children at an early age.

Bond’s “Henry: The Chameleon” effectively emphasises treating animals with care and respect. The author’s portrayal of the narrator’s grandfather saving a chameleon from harm serves as a potent reminder for humans to be mindful of their actions towards non-human creatures. Furthermore, the narrative highlights the dangers of accepting myths and false beliefs about animals. It is essential to recognise the significance of such works in promoting a more compassionate and informed approach to our interactions with the natural world (89-94).

Recently, the world has witnessed the outbreak of pandemics that have caused widespread fear and devastation. The children’s story “The Living Planet” by Manjula Padmanabhan explores the aftermath of an imaginary pandemic that resembles the present situation. The story revolves around Bella, a little girl who listens to her grandfather’s retelling of the “Dark Times,” a time when viruses decided to teach humans a lesson.

“Tell me again, Granpa,” says Bella, “about the Dark Times. How many people were there in the world? How did the few become clever and kind? What happened to the many who remained cruel and stupid?” (Padmanabhan)

The story highlights the need for an alternative lifestyle to help us escape such threats. While some may argue that such narratives may trigger eco-anxiety or ecophobia in children, a careful reading of the story reveals that it has a positive message. The worldwide need for a more inclusive, nature-friendly lifestyle is emphasised, and the narrative shows us how humans can learn to live in harmony with nature rather than trying to tame it to serve their greed. This story is a

powerful reminder of the importance of adopting a sustainable way of life that considers our environmental impact.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the world's ecological catastrophes in the new millennium, raising environmentally responsible children is no longer a choice but a necessity. We are passing on a fractured environment to future generations; therefore, raising awareness of environmental issues must start from the root. Throughout the annals, it has become clear that a profound nexus exists between the terrestrial realm and the world of literature. This ineluctable truth is underscored by the literary masterpieces of erudite wordsmiths hailing from diverse cultures and spanning aeons. Incorporating environmental topics into children's literature might raise ecological consciousness among upcoming generations.

Through its ability to evoke emotions and empathy in readers, fiction has the power to reveal more profound truths that non-fiction may struggle to express. Woolley (1990) recognised this and posited that it is precisely because of the emotional resonance of fiction that it can convey truth in a more profound and meaningful way. While non-fiction may provide factual information, it is often through the emotional journey of fictional characters that readers can truly grasp the weight and significance of certain truths.

Stories hold a special place in children's hearts as they connect their inner world with the world outside their home. Butzow (1989) suggests that this connection is vital to make science less abstract and more relatable to young learners. Science can be challenging for kids to grasp, so it is essential to help them understand it in a way that resonates with their experiences. Using stories and creativity, science can be accessible, engaging, and unforgettable for the next generation (Butzow and Butzow 4-6). Another creative approach is to amalgamate a conventional medium, such as a picture book, with an engaging narrative that allows young minds to develop empathy for the environment and scientific understanding. David Mitchell's classification of these books as "picture storybooks" highlights the integral relationship between the illustrations and text. The pictures and words work together seamlessly, and neither one is strong



enough to stand alone to create a captivating and immersive storytelling experience (Bhalla 2).

The study conducted by Andi Febriana Tamrin delves into the intricate relationship between children and nature. This connection is rooted in four primary factors that shape the bond between children and their natural surroundings. As per the definition of nature, it is considered a place of origin; therefore, children are inherently connected to it from birth (Tamrin 167-171). Another humanistic approach further asserts the importance of this bond in the formation of the persona of a child. The custodianship of nature falls on the shoulders of children, and it is only through a well-nurtured personality that they can fulfill this responsibility and ensure the continued provision of resources by nature. Thus, understanding the nature-children relationship is crucial for the sustainable development of both.

Ruskin Bond's *All-Time Favourite Nature Stories*, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Mama, What is the Night?* and "The Living Planet" are significant contributions to the field of environmental writing. Bond's book, featuring illustrations by David Yambem, offers a distinct perspective on the magnificence and significance of nature. At the same time, Padmanabhan's works address critical environmental issues and provide insightful messages about the need for eco-consciousness. Employing children's literature, particularly storybooks and picture books, to inculcate a culture of sustainable living and ecological mindfulness among future generations can be a highly effective approach for research and pedagogical professionals. These literary resources can serve as invaluable instruments in fostering environmental consciousness among future generations.

## Note

1. This shloka makes salutations to the holy Mother Earth and apologises for stepping on her and trampling her heavenly body with our feet. Recognising the sanctity of nature, this shloka serves to remind us of our responsibility to treat the environment with the utmost respect and reverence.

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