

A Reading of Jeyanthi Manokaran's short Narrative on the Role of Children's Literature in Environmentalism Chipko Establishes Himself

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Abstract

Chipko takes root is a short story for children that explore a very serious theme that emphasises the need for environment protection and preservation. This paper attempts to explore the major role played by children throughout the story to protect their environment and its natural resources and the struggle they undergo to finally attain the desired success. It thereby aims to emphasise the need to educate and spread awareness in children, the future generation at a very early stage, about the environmental issues that requires very serious concern and the ways to tackle them through non-violence. This paper also attempts to discuss a major issue of the exploitation of the vast natural resources in the name of development and the after effects of such thoughtless deeds. The Chipko movement that serves the background of the story not only provides children an awareness of a great historical non-violent movement but also discusses children as contributors to sustainable ecological development.

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1. Introduction

Constitutionally, children are recognised as resources for the country's development, necessitating their nurturing and advancement. Childhood is hence regarded a cultural and social construction, and not simply as a universal stage in the physical and psychological development of human beings.

From the beginning, children are always entertained by their adults with tell-tales, beast fables, folktales and other short stories with moral messages. Though initially narrated to children, these stories gradually developed into written forms. Until the 16th century, children did not have any specific book written for them. But the late 19th century and the early 20th century came to be known as the "Golden Age of Children's Literature" as the period witnessed the publication of numerous books, now popular as classics.

Children's literature or Juvenile literature includes stories, books, magazines and poems that are enjoyed by children. It can broadly be classified as anything that children read. Story books are the best tools to educate and spread awareness in the children about serious social concerns. Picture books and books with illustrations create a magical spell in them. It provides them a visual treat and is easy for them to comprehend. The necessity to raise awareness in the children about the need to protect their environment is now inevitable. Children are always curious and they quickly respond to the changes in their surroundings. They constantly question their elders with eagerness about the minute changes that they sense around them. So it is easy to educate them to love and protect Mother Nature and its resources [1]. But the truth is that though the schools have now included Environmental Study (EVS) as a subject of study, no much practical experience is gained by children

apart from the theoretical knowledge. Picture books and illustrated books help a lot in such situations.

2. A Brief History of Environmentalism

Environmentalism can be described as a movement that advocates the preservation, restoration and improvement of the natural environment by controlling pollution and protecting the plant and animal diversity, maintaining a balance between human beings and the various natural systems on which they depend. Though the roots of environmental protection can be traced back to the 6th century B.C, with the revival of Jainism which advocated the protection of life through non-violence, it gained momentum in Britain in the latter half of the 19th century as a reaction against industrialisation. The emergence of factories caused immense consumption of coal and the discharge of large volumes of untreated chemical waste causing air and water pollution. This led to the emergence of environment protection laws. Earlier, interest in environment was a feature of the 19th century Romantic Movement initiated by Nature poets like William Wordsworth. But later, a "Back to Nature" movement was advocated by intellectuals like John Ruskin, William Morris and George Bernard Shaw who were against pollution, consumerism and other activities harmful to Nature. They glorified rural life and advised people to return to it. In the United States, the environment movement was initiated in the 19th century by John Muir and Thoreau.

The late 19th century also witnessed the passage and enactment of the first wildlife conservation laws. In the 20th century, The Forestry Commission was set up to ensure afforestation and reforestation. From the 1950s, photography was used as a major tool

to enhance public awareness of the need to protect land and animals. Protection of environment and trees has now turned out to be an inevitable necessity in the developing world.

In India, the Chipko Movement was set up in 1970s as a peaceful protest against deforestation, by hugging the trees. They led the most influential protest by following the Gandhian principle of non-violence, raising slogans like “ecology is permanent economy”. Now in 2018, India, once again participates in the Chipko movement to save 14,000 trees from being felled, to provide accommodation for the government officials waiting for eligible housing [2].

3. Chipko Movement

The Chipko Movement is an agitation which started off in 1973 in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. This non-violent movement initiated by women and children aimed at the protection and conservation of trees. In Hindi, the term ‘Chipko’ literally means ‘to stick’ or ‘hug’. Women who lost everything they had due to floods and landslides, caused due to the rise in deforestation, united and fought for the cause of preserving forest. They protested by sticking or hugging the trees in order to prevent it from being axed.

The history of the actual Chipko movement dates back to the 18th century. The first and the fiercest environmental protection movement started off in Rajasthan. In 1730s when Marwar Maharaj Abhay Singh ordered to cut down the sacred Khejri trees to build his new palace, a Khejarli village woman named Amrita Devi and her three daughters sacrificed their lives to protect the trees. This sacrifice inspired other members of the community and a total of 363 members sacrificed their lives in

the following days trying to save the trees by embracing them while the Maharaj’s men chopped their bodies with axes. This incident led the king to ban the felling of trees in all Bishnoi villages. In 1970s, this sacrifice became the inspiration for the famous Chipko movement [3].

The Chipko Andolan of 1970s was a mass movement in which both the male and the female activists from Uttarakhand played vital roles to halt the ravaging of the Himalayas. The rural folk undertook the Gandhian principle of non-violence in order to stop the forest contractors from cutting down the trees and looting the timber in the name of development. The day when men came to cut the trees in Reni district, Gaura Devi, the head of the village Mahila Mangal Dal, led 27 women folk to the site to confront the loggers. Though the loggers abused and ill-threatened the women with their guns, the women folk protested by hugging the trees and keeping night vigil to guard the trees from the loggers. The news spread to the other villages and the protest continued until the news reached the then State Chief Minister Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna, who organised a committee to consider the issue, which finally ruled in favour of the villagers. Apart from Gaura Devi, Sunderlal Bahuguna, an environmentalist, too made notable contributions to the cause with the creation of his popular Chipko slogan, “Ecology is permanent economy” [4]. Other activists like Dhoom Singh Negi and Bachni Devi coined the slogan, “What do the forests bear”, “Soil, water and pure air”. Ghanshyam Raturi too made tremendous contribution by composing numerous Chipko songs.

This true historical incident has been transformed into a short story by Jeyanthi Manokaran, a writer and

illustrator, to educate the children about the need to protect the environment and to motivate and empower the young minds to take action against the atrocities towards nature.

4. *Chipko takes root: An Analysis of the Role of Children in the Protection of Environment*

Chipko takes root is a short story for children, set in the hills, that shows what bravery and grit can accomplish. It tells the story of Dichi, a brave Bhotia girl who takes part in the Chipko Movement to save her beloved trees. This story based on the Chipko movement of the 1970s tells a heart warming tale of the power of collective action as seen through the eyes of young Dichi [5].

The story open by introducing Dichi, a young girl, who sits high upon the branches of her favourite ash tree, playing a dholak- a folk instrument. She, while crossing the river, along with her father, tumbles and falls into the river and gets trapped in a sudden furious flood. Her left leg gets caught beneath a rolling boulder and is somehow rescued by her uncle, who had been fishing nearby. In this sad plight, Dichi loses the power of her left leg and also her beloved father who gets trapped in the currents of the raging water. Dichi then happens to hear about the sports company that felled the forest woods likes chir, pine, deodar and ash trees to make cricket bats and other sports stuff. The young girl learns from the older people that the mass felling of the trees by the company for their economic gain has caused the landside beneath the mountain area which in turn caused sudden floods. This selfish act of the company, which took away the life of her father, many a village folks and even the power of her left leg which has no sensation in it below the knee, leaves a

permanent scar in her little heart. Dichi has now ended up using crutches, made by her uncle using the branches of her favourite ash tree, to support her feeble leg. Soon, with the encouragement of her uncle, she wells up the courage to overcome her loss. Later, one day Dichi happens to overhear her aunt say to Ma that her brother's habit of gambling can put them in great trouble. Dichi could not believe her ears as she was shocked to know that her uncle was a gambler.

Days pass. One day Dichi happens to attend a meeting organised by Gauri, the village elder. The village elder cautions the villagers of the impending danger and the urgent need to stop the Company from felling the trees to prevent further landslides and fierce floods. She advices the village folk to march into the forest and hug the chir, pine, deodar and ash trees when Chand, the Contractor and his axemen come to axe the trees. The villagers troop into the forest chanting Chipko slogans. Dichi carries her dholak with her to boom along with the chant of children who bounce around like rubber balls.

Dhoom Dadaka!

Dhoom Dadaka!

Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom!

“What do these forests bear? Shouts Dichi.

“Soil, water and pure air”, chorus the children, following her with a hop and a jump (Manokaran 12).

The villagers thus clamour and cluster around the uniformed axemen, who according to the barking orders of the Contractor marks the trees for auction, with a chalky white X. The kids and women brandish their dholaks filling the forest with Chipko slogans and drive the axemen away.

The next day, the village awakes with a sudden turn of events. The village men get ready for a long trip down the mountainside. Trucks are sent by the government for the men folk to view the film- a sudden treat that can't be ignored, as movies are rarely seen in these parts. In the evening while lingering in the forest, enjoying the calm of her favourite ash tree, Dichi happens to view from the tree top a troop of men in uniform, axes in their arms, marching towards the forest. Dichi hurries down, gropes her crutches and hurries home shouting for help. Though initially worried about the absence of their men folk, women and kids soon gather around with dholaks and marches into the forest singing Chipko songs. They soon realise that they were tricked by the company and the government by intentionally taking away their menfolk. The kids attempt to erase the X marked on the trees by hugging it. The angry men grab and push the women and kids. Dichi's eagle eyes scrutinises the axemen who crowd around her. Shocked at recognising an axeman hiding behind the trees, Dichi and her brothers rush towards the man, only to ensure that it was their uncle. Seeing the kids uncle drops the axe and lamely apologises that he hasn't any work and badly needs money to pay off his gambling debt. The kids plead their uncle to stop felling the trees and offers to help him repay his debt. Dichi offers to weave a shawl and sell it, Ram offers to work at the soap unit, and Shyam offers to work in the water mill to help their uncle clear his debt. Filled with tears, their uncle throws away his uniform, picks up Dichi's dholak and starts singing the Chipko song, accompanied by a chorus of women and kids. Hearing this, out of frustration, Contractor Chand yells at Dichi, "these forests bear timber, resin and foreign exchange!" (28)

Dichi pleads and shouts hugging on to her tree:

"No! No! No! Pleeeeeease don't!"

"The forests are our saviours!"

"She's right", says Uncle.

"She lost her Father in that flood" (28).

Hearing this, one by one, the axemen clinks their axes down and troops out of the forest.

"Chipko! Hug the trees!" cries Dichi (29).

Hoarse voices echoes with the wind that whines through the chir, pine, deodar and the ash trees.

"Cut this forest and you'll wipe out our village," says Ma (29).

Shaking his angry fist, Contractor Chand stamps his feet, turns on his heel and marches away.

"We did it!" says Ma. We'll take our Chipko Movement to every part of India."

"Chipko! Hug the trees!" cry the women and children (31).

The ash sways in the breeze. Dichi rests her cheek against its cool bark and whispers to her ash tree, "I'm like you, strong and fierce like a Yeti...sturdy as a yak" (31).

5. Conclusion

Childhood is now regarded to be a social phenomenon rather than a natural one. Hence children are now regarded as social actors and agents. This inverts the previous conceptualisation of children as passive beneficiaries, silent objects of concern, who are dependent on adult control and care. Such re-envisioning regard children and young people as a part of social structure, who are competent enough to participate in the issues of the society and to raise voice against any issue that affect their lives. They are constructed as 'being' instead of 'becoming'.

Thus the short story *Chipko takes root* proves that children are the best agents to raise

the awareness of environmental issues. Once the young girl Dichi realises the cause of the flood and the reason for the loss of her beloved father, the girl alerts herself when she hears about the arrival of the Contractor and his men. She leads the other children and gathers the women folk by signalling them with her dholak. A sense of urgency flames in her and she takes up the matter under her leadership. She motivates the other children by enchanting them with her songs and the rhythm of her dholak. This quality of Dichi pictured in the story can obviously ignite the minds of the little readers and therefore Children's Literature can definitely be used as a way to raise environmental consciousness in the future generation. Jeyanthi Manokaran can truly be appreciated for her attempt to fictionalise and capsule the real Chipko movement into an illustrated short story for children. As the title of Glenda Luymes news report dated 29 November 2018, in the annual report of *Children and Nature Network* reports, "Kids Need More Green Time and Less Screen Time" [6].

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