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FICTION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS IN INDIA: CRITICAL ESSAYS

Dr. Shobha Ramaswamy
Department of English
Kongunadu Arts & Science College
Coimbatore 641029
Tamilnadu, India
shobini_2005@yahoo.co.in

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Author's Note

Indian writing in English for children and young adults has come of age, with a plethora of talented and dedicated writers contributing their creative efforts towards the growth of this new field.

From the re-telling of folk tales, mythological stories and classics such as the *Panchatantra, Hitopadesha* and the *Jataka Tales*, Indian writing for the young passed through a phase of western influence and has now emerged with a voice of its own.

Indian fiction in English for children and young adults is realistic and deals with the problems and interests of the day. It is neither sentimental nor overtly didactic, but has attained the golden mean. Humour and fantasy, too, have their place, as do mystery and adventure stories, tales of the supernatural, science fiction and historical and mythological creative fiction. Writers for the young have also shown their concern for ecology and the natural environment.

Prominent writers include Nilima Sinha, Ranjit Lal, Deepak Dalal, Ira Saxena, Paro Anand, Devika Rangachari, Anushka Ravishankar, Asha Nehemiah, Monideepa Sahu, Payal Dhar, Zai Whitaker, Harini Gopalswami Sreenivasan, Vandana Singh, Suniti Namjoshi,and Deepa Agarwal, among others. Writers such as Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Nair, Mahaswetha Devi and Sashi Deshpande have also written for the young.

Apart from long-established publishers such as Children's Book Trust and National Book Trust, highly innovative publishing houses such as Tulika, Tara, Katha, Pratham Books, Karadi Tales, Terrapin, Red Turtle, Young Zubaan , Duckbill and India Ink, to name a few, have emerged successfully.

More academic interest in this burgeoning field which has immense possibilities for fresh research is the need of the hour. This collection of research papers is a humble effort towards this worthy end.

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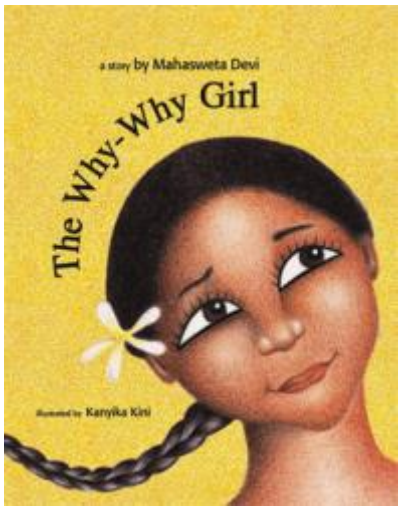
Mahasweta Devi
Courtesy: http://www.harmonyindia.org/hportal/VirtualPageView.jsp?page_id=12534

Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi (1926-) was born in East Bengal. Starting out as a teacher and a journalist, she went on to become a full-time writer and social activist. She has published twenty collections of short stories and nearly one hundred novels, mainly in Bengali. She is the recipient of several literary prizes, including the Jnanapath and the Magsaysay awards.

Mahasweta Devi raises issues of politics, gender and class in her works. She is chiefly interested in the lives of the tribal communities of India, known as *Adivasis*. She calls them "the suffering spectators of the India that is travelling towards the twenty first century". (Spivak xi) Besides championing their cause through literature, she has donated her award money towards their welfare (Wikipedia).

The Why-Why Girl



The Why-Why Girl, her first picture book for children, has, unlike many of her other works, been written originally in English. The response to this twenty-four page story (which is not paginated) was immediate and overwhelming. Eminent literary figures such as Girish Karnad and Ambai came forward to translate it. *The Why-Why Girl* is now available in six regional languages.

Moyna and Questions

Children are full of curiosity about the brave new world around them. It is a child's nature to ask questions. Adults are generally indifferent to the child's need to know and understand. But sensitive ones appreciate this trait and answer the child's questions or direct it towards sources of knowledge. Traditionally, the interrogative forms the basis of education. In India, the *gurus* of ancient times would impart knowledge only when the pupil raised questions. They interpreted it as readiness to learn.

A Tribal Girl

The book relates the heartwarming tale of the ten-year old Moyna who belongs to the Shabar tribe, an exploited and marginalized hill people. They own no land and are practically

slaves to the local landlords. Moyna is burdened with the triple handicap of being a child, a female and a tribal. Yet, unlike her passive companions, Moyna raises new and troubling questions. These questions reveal the plight of the forest-dwellers, and the casual way in which their hardships are accepted.

The Context and the Environment

The narrator is Mahasweta Devi herself, who is staying in a tribal village to further the workings of the *Samiti*, a group which is striving towards the education and welfare of the tribals. It has as its centre a community building, known as the *Samiti* office, which is a place where the local people, especially women and children, can get together, learn, organize their lives more efficiently, and also relax.

Why Not to Catch a Snake?

The opening "scene" of the book is shocking. "But why"? asks the small tribal girl, and the reader gets to know that the question is in response to Mahasweta Devi's urgent call not to catch a large snake which is passing that way. Devi explains that it is a dangerous cobra, but the girl Moyna is not perturbed. To her, a cobra means food and money, "We eat snakes, you know," Moyna said, "The head you chop off, the skin you sell, the meat you cook." The innocent girl's words bring out the harsh reality of her existence. She persists in her attempt, but is finally distracted through her love for questioning. "But why?" she asks again.

A Continuous Stream of Activity

Devi drags Moyna to the Samiti office, where Moyna's mother Khiri sits weaving a basket. Moyna refuses to take any rest, denying that she is tired. Her life is one continuous stream of activity and she does not regret one moment of it. She has plenty of work to do. If

she takes rest, "Who will bring the goats home? And collect firewood and fetch water and lay traps for the birds?" she demands. It is revealed that the Shabars did not usually send their daughters to work. Moyna has to earn because her mother has a bad leg and cannot walk properly. Moyna's father has gone off to Jamshedpur in search of work. Her elder brother, Goro, collects firewood in the forest. Theirs is a difficult and thankless existence. But they live close to nature and are by temperament cheerful people.

Can't Help Questioning Unfairness

Moyna is happy, but she is so very intelligent that she cannot help questioning the unfairness of her life. She asks uncomfortable questions such as, "Why do I have to walk so far to the river to fetch water? Why do we live in a leaf hut? Why can't we eat rice twice a day?" These innocent and sensible questions show how easily the hardships of the downtrodden are taken for granted. The Shabars are deprived of what people in the mainstream of society enjoy as a right.

Are They Entitled for Human Dignity?

Socio-economic inequalities are rampant in the tribal belts, with the *babus* or landowners expecting all labour of drudgery from the poor people. In return for their labour, the *babus* bestow upon the tribals a few crumbs of their leftover food. By tradition, the *adivasis* are expected to accept these with profound and abject gratitude. Through Moyna's questions, Mahasweta Devi asks the reader whether the tribals are entitled to fundamental human dignity. Devi writes, "Moyna tended the goats of the village landlords or babus, but she was neither humble nor grateful. She did her work and came home in the evening." Moyna does not want to eat the landlords' leftovers. She prefers to cook a delicious meal for her family with greens, crabs and rice.

Do They Thank Me?

Moyna's attitude displeases her mother who wants her to thank the landlord for the rice that he has sent. Moyna is boldly outspoken when she asks "Why should I?... Does he ever thank me? Why should I?" She is well aware that the hard work that she does, sweeping the cowshed, grazing the goats and doing "a thousand jobs for him" does merit some acknowledgement. She further questions why a little girl like her has to do such hard work. "Why do I have to graze the Babus' goats? Their boys can do it." This, in an adult, would amount to serious subversion of hierarchical norms. But in the voice of a ten-year old, it takes on a pathetic and thought-provoking tone.

The Why-Why-Girl

Moyna asks so many questions that the postmaster dubs her the "Why-Why Girl." Khiri finds her daughter's habit of questioning a nuisance. She is worried that her child is obstinate and not meek like other girls. But Devi finds her "Whys" inspiring and refreshing, and develops a liking for Moyna. This is reciprocated by the little girl, who declares that she would move into her hut. This she says in a casual, offhand manner, after taking an arbitrary decision. To her mother's objection, Moyna answers that the hut is a large one, and that "one old woman" (Mahasweta Devi) does not need much space! This is an example of the straightforwardness of the tribals. She firmly says that she would go to work and return to the hut in the evenings. This right decision appears to be an instinctive step towards the fulfilment of her destiny.

Why Do Stars Look So Small?

Moyna soon appears, with a change of clothes done up in a bundle and her pet, a baby mongoose. Malati, the Samiti teacher, warns Devi that the girl would exhaust her with her

questions. Indeed, Devi finds that Moyna asks questions not just about society, but also about the world of nature, for which she has a true love. Moyna asks, looking up at the sky, "Why do stars look so small if many of them are bigger than the sun?" This question is evocative of the tribal people's existence. Their lives are rich and their contribution to the economy of the nation is huge, but they are ignored and belittled, not only because they live far away from the political and economic centres of the country, but also because they are tribals who are not highly advanced, nor do they belong to the upper castes.

Fascination with the Reading Habit

Devi's reading habit fascinates the child. Soon, she learns that books hold the key to all her questions - they have the answers to her whys! If she wants to satisfy her curiosity and her thirst for knowledge, she needs to learn to read. Necessity propels her to become literate. Moyna applies her quick brain to learning and soon becomes an avid reader. She starts to share her new-found knowledge about the universe, good habits and so on with the other children, including her siblings.

You Know Nothing – Do You Know Why?

The next year, when Devi returns, she hears the little girl arguing with the Samiti teacher. Moyna and the other village children are unable to study because they have to graze the cows and goats in the morning. The school hours are only from 9 to 11 am. She tries to persuade the teacher to hold classes after 11 AM so that the children could come to study. This is a sensible suggestion since commonsense dictates that facilities should suit local needs. Moyna is successful in her efforts. She gets a positive reply to her cry of appeal, "Why shouldn't I study too?" A little thinking and a few timely words change her existence. Proud of her victory, she tells her brother and sister, "You know nothing – do you know why? Because you don't attend classes at the Samiti." Mahasweta Devi then raises a question of her

own, albeit a rhetorical one: "Who do you think was the first girl to be admitted to the village primary school? Moyna." This is a personal victory for her and a boon for her companions.

Ask Questions, Ask Questions!

At the end of the story, Moyna is eighteen. She is a teacher at the Samiti. Moyna trains her young pupils to ask questions and so become well-informed and assertive human beings. Devi remarks jocularly that if she knew that a book was being written about her, Moyna would characteristically ask, "Why?"

Moyna's thirst for knowledge, her child-like curiosity, her innocence, frankness, sense of responsibility and self-respect attract the reader. Her revealing questions carry a wealth of meaning and throw light on the grim reality of tribal existence. Moyna's determination to get educated, enriches her life as well as that of her people. She is able to find the answers to her many questions and to prepare the next generation to take their rightful place in society.

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The Dilemma of the Dispossessed in Nilima Sinha's *Red Blooms in the Forest*

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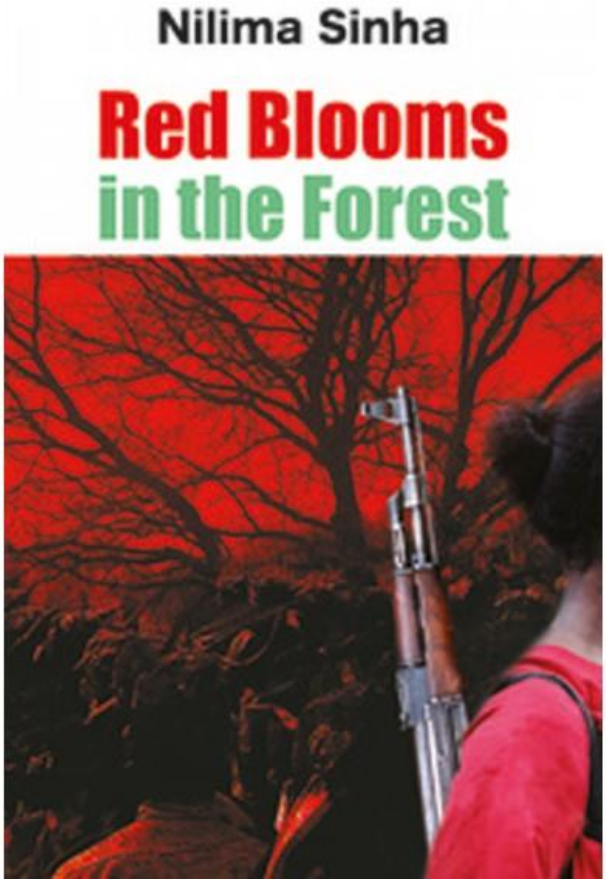

First Hand Knowledge of Tribal Belt in Jharkhand

Nilima Sinha

Nilima Sinha is an acclaimed writer of children's books with several distinctions to her credit. Her book, *Adventure before Midnight*, was selected for the White Raven List for libraries internationally. Smt. Sinha writes both in English and in Hindi. A translator, writer,

editor, critic and storyteller, she is President of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC), the Indian Section of the International Board on Boo for Young People (IBBY). Her books on mystery and adventure include *The Mystery of the Falling Mountains*, *The Chandipur Jewels* and *The Search for the Sacred Gem.* Her extensive travels across continents have further strengthened her knowledge of literature. As wife of Shri Yashwant Sinha, former Cabinet Minister and MP from Jharkhand, and also of mother of current central minister and MP from Jharkhand, Shri Jayanth Sinha, she has interacted closely with the local people of Jharkhand, especially women, and is familiar with life at the grassroosts level in the Naxal-affected Hazaribagh District.

Young adult fiction in India has come of age, covering not only the concerns of urban youth, but also the marginalized, non-elite sections, living in villages and small towns. Nilima Sinha, distinguished bilingual author of fiction for children and young adults, has, in *Red Blooms in the Forest*, utilized her first-hand knowledge of life at the grassroots level in the tribal belts of Jharkhand.

Champa and Her Life

The novel centres round the life of the teen-aged girl, Champa, whose father, Ganeshi Mahto's land is forcibly taken away by a factory owner, who pays a mere pittance for it. So the dispossessed farmer is force to work in a cement factory as a daily labourer. He has no other source of livelihood. Rice is sold at the shops at prices above the market rates and the shopkeeper refuses to give him credit. As Champa says, but for their cow they would have starved.

Though the villagers live surrounded by scenic beauty, the landscape holds no fascination for them. The surrounding forest is a forbidden and threatening area, inhabited by the 'jungle folk,' as they call the Maoists.

Entry of Naxalites

The peace of Champa's existence is disturbed when armed naxalites break down the door of their house and demand dinner. They kill Champa's younger brother Gopal's little goat and force Champa to cook the meat. This incident is brought to the notice of the police by their neighbours. The police, suspecting that they are Maoist sympathizers, drag Ganeshi off to prison in spite of his pleas. Uneducated, poor and utterly helpless, the innocent man is unjustly imprisoned. Champa's stepmother orders the girl to obtain the release of her father by any means. Champa goes to the police station to appeal to the officers there. She barely escapes being assaulted.

Helping Hand of Vijay, a Maoist

Champa then calls the mobile number of Vijay, one of the Maoists who had visited their house. Vijay's background is an interesting one. He comes from a well-to-do family, but is cheated by his relatives of his inheritance when his father dies in an accident. After his mother's death, his college education comes to an end. His dreams of entering the civil services and fighting corruption are shattered, because he no longer believes that he could fight corruption through that avenue. It is then that he listens to his friend, Sudhir, the son of a rich lawyer who is filled with disgust about the graft in society. Sudhir tells him how his father once defended a man guilty of raping a poor girl and how this had led to his disillusionment: "I want the world to be fair and equal towards all. Why should someone from a rich family get away with crime, while someone who is weak anyway has to suffer? It is not right". (23) Sudhir tries to persuade his father to take up Vijay's case, but to no avail. His father refuses because many influential people are involved. Sudhir, who has no great respect for the law, resorts to subterfuge in order to obtain pension for a poor widow. He feels that the end justifies the means. Vijay does not agree with this, but is persuaded by his friend

to meet certain people who are struggling to create a just society. In this way, he is inducted into the Maoist movement. He becomes a firm believer in the cause. As he later tells Champa, "The government has no feelings. Their people will harass the poor and the helpless, and will suck up to the rich". (34)

Encounter with Maoist Group

Vijay takes Champa deep into the jungle to meet his colleagues. The Maoist group is led by Commander Bhaskar Reddy, a former physics professor. Bhaskar, too, has had bitter experience with rich and powerful people, who murdered his sister and got him dismissed from his faculty position. Commander Bhaskar has now evolved into a brilliant strategist. Champa is astounded to find that the camp is well-organised and very neat. The girls and boys there attend classes on Maoist doctrine and are trained to handle weapons, thus empowering themselves with self-confidence. This appeals to Champa, whose education has been cut short by her stepmother. She finds there an opportunity to exercise her intellectual skills. So, though hesitant, she agrees to stay on and be part of the group.

Stories of Suffering

The girls in the camp relate stories of poverty, deprivation and discrimination. Champa's friend Munia had fled her home in Bihar because her parents, who could not afford a decent dowry, had planned to marry her off to an old man.

Usha, from Odisha, had run away because it was decided that she would be sent to Delhi to work as a maid-servant. The sisters Sita and Uma came from a nearby village. Their parents found it difficult to feed and clothe their nine daughters and so had sold them to the jungle people for a few hundred rupees.

Ganga, from Chhattishgarh was the eldest of seven siblings. She had never been sent to school, because she was needed to look after the young ones. Her parents, who were laqbourers, chose to turn a blind eye on their lecherous landlord's attempts to seduce her. She had left in a hurry after attacking her would-be rapist with a sharp instrument. "Molested, exploited and hurt by both near and dear ones as well as those in authority they had set out to make new lives for themselves". (73) "A majority of the trainees were uneducated, unemployed youngsters recruited from the tribal villages close by.

Coming from desperately poor families, they were glad to join the guerilla army for paltry salaries, sometimes only because by joining the squad they got enough to eat". (161)

Commander Rekha

The exception was Commander Rekha, a medico who had left her rich husband, because she believed in the Maoist doctrine. Some villagers like Dipu Oran, who gave the group information about police activities are attached to the jungle folk, whom they considered beneficiaries. Even Champa's stepmother is not averse to taking payment for food from the Maoists.

Marxist Literature, Extreme Violence

Vijay and Sudhir read naxalite literature which believes in the annihilation of class distinctions, if need be, with extreme violence and the establishment of a classless society across various states of India. The group plans two missions - the kidnapping of a rich man's son for ransom, and the raiding of a police outpost in order to capture arms and ammunition.

Kidnapping of Manas Gupta

Manas Gupta, the grandson of Ram Prakash Gupta is the chosen victim. He has just arrived for a vacation after graduating from Harvard. His kidnapping is justified by the Maoists because they think that his grandfather had made his fortune from illegal coal deals and from selling spurious liquor. The kidnap operation is successful, though Manas is shot in the leg by Vijay when he attempts to escape. However, the raid on the police station is a failure. The police are forewarned and forearmed. Sudhir is killed in the raid and his death is a big blow to Bhaskar, who loves the company of argumentative and intellectual young people.

Manas Gupta and Naxalites

In order to find a substitute for Sudhir, Bhaskar adopts a friendly approach towards his victim. He hopes to convert Manas to his cause, since he feels that the mechanical expertise of the bright IIT-Harvard graduate would be useful. So he provides him with Maoist literature and explains his point of view. The strength of the novel lies in the arguments between the dispossessed and the rich and educated youth. But Manas has nothing but scorn for the outlaws, whom he considers more dangerous than wild beasts. "I see that you are a young man, about my own age, maybe well-educated . . . yet you live in the jungle, killing and destroying . . . why?" he questions Vijay. It is Champa who replies: "To stop the rich from troubling us…. You have no idea about the poor . . . what they must go through!" (143) Vijay tells Manas: "You are so used to your own comfortable life you are blind to the problems of others". (144) But there were many brave and unselfish people who chose to give up their safety and luxuries in order to help the people by living in the jungles.

Manas asks sarcastically, whether by living in the jungle those people would save enough money to help the poor. Vijay says that they want to create an ideal world by destroying the bourgeoisie. Manas argues in favour of law courts and democracy. But Vijay

and Champa are not convinced. Even voting out a corrupt government would not destroy corruption, they argue. What was needed was a revolution. Commander Bhaskar enters at this juncture and remarks that their cause needs educated youth who need not join them in the jungle, but could work for their cause in many ways. He hopes to indoctrinate Manas, whose courage he appreciates.

When asked by Bhaskar whether he had gone through the naxalite literature, Manas replies: "it is a call to act against your own people, your own nation, your own Constitution. You wish to wage a war against our own country? Everything's wrong. . . .Your way is not the right way". (159) However, Bhaskar is happy that he has read the literature and finds his reaction quite normal. He hopes to gradually bring about a change in the young man's mind.

Change of Heart

As Bhaskar anticipates, Manas does begin to understand and appreciate the viewpoint of Marx, but does not feel that Marxism approves of kidnapping and ransom. Bhaskar replies: "Let me inform you. Violence is only a means to achieve your goals. . . . if the ultimate goal is to help the helpless and downtrodden, any means is justified". (172-73)

"Yes, the world is not fair towards the weak..… The capitalists consume everything, leaving nothing for the poor. . . I also agree that a new world order must be created where there is no exploitation and no inequality. You are very right about it all". (173) Bhaskar's delight at his words is momentary, since Manas goes on to explain his stance - he still believes in non-violence and democracy! The disappointed Bhaskar retorts that democracy belongs to the weak; it takes courage to shed blood. But Manas says that the youth of the country is idealistic and desire to bring about transformation. They will fight corruption with their enthusiasm, intelligence, expertise and hard work. Bhaskar retorts that consumerism and the love of soft living will prevent them from doing anything constructive. He asks: "Tell me,

have you done any good at all, to anyone in the world ever?" (176) The professor's query strikes at the heart of the young man, who concedes, "You have a point, Sir . . .". (176) But in order to change society, money was necessary. So making money was not a crime, as long as it was for the benefit of society. There, he differs from the Marxist belief that the rich are villainous. Bhaskar is happy to find the seeds of social awareness springing up in the youth.

It is noteworthy that while the debate goes on, each speaker looks at Champa to watch her reaction. Champa acts as a sounding board and is symbolic of the effect of both parties on the future of the country.

Manas' Influence over Champa

Champa starts being subtly influenced by Manas. He tells her that the jungle people are using the poor of the region for their own ends. They are not interested in providing them with the means to overcome their disabilities. Education was the only means of removing ignorance, and, consequently, poverty. "You should acquire skills . . . I think you will make a good nurse". (189) Champa starts worrying about the future. She cannot be a blind follower like Vijay.

Bhaskar's Killing and Torturing Villagers

Soon, Bhaskar's cruel temperament raises its ugly head. He has no compunction in torturing and killing villagers whom he suspects of passing information to the police. A vivid description of a jungle stream which runs pink with the blood of a beheaded man is given to let the reader understand the other face of Bhaskar. He is inhuman is his belief that nothing should stand in the way of his aim. He also sets Vijay the task of extorting money from the contractors involved in the laying of road and railway lines. Vijay threatens a contractor with his gun almost like a highwayman. It is clear that any development work undertaken in the

region is subject to payment of protection money. Bhaskar feels that Vijay is too soft and he could leave the group unless he is involved in criminal activities such as kidnapping, killing and extortion and so he deliberately sends his lieutenant on such missions. Manas's grandfather refuses to pay ransom and instead sends the police force with a helicopter to fight the guerillas. Bhaskar, already furious that Manas refuses to join the group, orders his torture and execution.

Champa Saves Manas

However, Manas is saved by Champa, who is horrified by Bhaskar's order. Manas gains his freedom with her help. Many members of the group, including Commander Rekha and Munia are killed. Champa, who learns that her father has been released, urges Vijay to come with her to the village. When the loyal Vijay prefers to join Bhaskar in hiding, Champa resolves to leave behind her love, determined to pursue her studies and to empower herself thereby. Manas decides to stay back in India to build schools and colleges, where people like Champa would be provided with education free of cost.

Authentic Setting and Realistic Characterization

The novel impresses us through its authentic setting, realistic characterization and unbiased, daring portrayal of both the authorities and the insurgents. It emphasizes the truth that the solution to the problem of poverty and violence lies in making education affordable and accessible to all the people.

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Ira Saxena's *The Curse of Grass*: An Ecofeminist Reading

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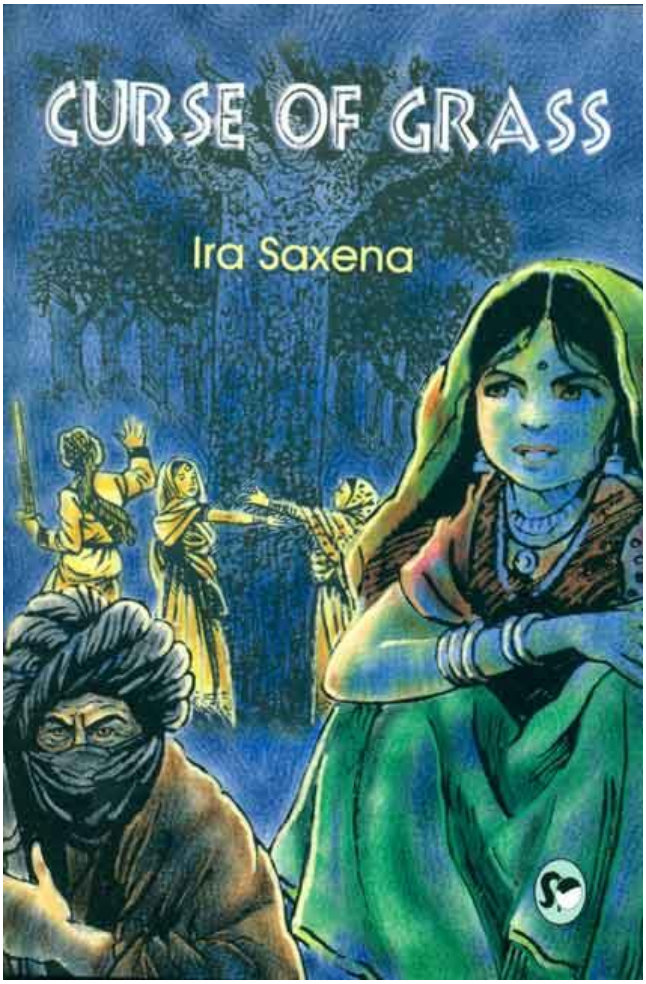

The Rise of Eco-criticism

One of the offshoots of postcolonial criticism is the rise of eco-criticism which studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. (Glotfelty xviii. Feminist eco-criticism takes the standpoint that man is the exploiter of both woman and nature. Women have been perceived, down the ages, as nurturers and protectors. Women have often taken on the role of activists, the Chipko movement being a prime example of their participation in the effort to prevent deforestation.

Imparting Value-based Experience

The creators of children's fiction in India have always been keenly sensitive to the need to inculcate a value-based experience to their young readership.

Dr. Ira Saxena

Ira Saxena, one of the most respected writers and critics of children's literature in India, has dealt with eco-centric themes in many of other her fictional narratives, *The Green Planet* and *Panna, The Lonely Duckling* and so on. The Chipko movement of the eighteenth century in which the Bishnoi people living on the banks of the River Luni near the Thar Desert laid down their lives to protect the *kejari* trees, forms the background of *The Curse of Grass*.

After her graduation in Psychology, Ira Saxena studied child-behaviour and worked for her doctoral degree. She completed her doctorate in Child Psychology in 1983. She began her career as a lecturer in Psychology. Reading English and Hindi literature has always been a passion with her and she indulged in painting landscapes in oil, as a hobby. Her writing, which started with articles in college magazines and local papers, took a professional turn as she began to writing stories for children. She gave counselling to children and parents and wrote stories, novels, non-fiction in Hindi and English. Many of her stories have been published in various story-collections, magazines, text books and her own story collection.

Of her publications 'Caught by Computer' and 'The Virus Trap', both computer crime novels have been popular with child readers, 'For the Green Planet' is a science fiction, 'Manmauji Mamaji'(in Hindi) relates the humorous adventures of a favourite Uncle, and 'Gajmukta ki Talaash'(in Hindi) is a tale reinforcing the Gandhian principles of non-violence. She started exploring themes of adventure writings include adventure novels, computer crime stories and weaving the interesting aspects of developing technology.

Eventually writing about the Independence struggle in India her stories and novels portrayed more meaningful adventures (Curse of Grass, Faces in my cupboard) with an undercurrent of Gandhian thought and non-violence. She has won many awards for her stories and books, the most prestigious being **Shankar's Award for Writing 1996** (Gajmukta ki Talaash) and **White Raven's Selection 2000, Germany** (The Virus Trap). The status of children's literature and the rich cultural heritage of stories caught her attention as she wrote articles and research papers on children's literature. She is one of the founding members of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC) which is the Indian Section of IBBY. She has been actively involved, now for the last twenty five years, in various programmes of AWIC, first as a Treasurer and then as the Secretary, organising seminars, exhibitions, developing and editing books. She has participated in many national and international conferences speaking about the aspects of children's literature and the need for good books. For a decade years she stayed in U.K. where she was teaching Psychology in college, verbal skills to little ones and participated in conferences on children's books. She received Unesco study fellowship at the International Youth Library, Munich and studied the Depiction of Indian Characters in English books for children. Once again she is back with her unconditional support to AWIC and involvement in Children's Literature.

She has been on the Board of International Board on Books for Young People, Jury member of the international IBBY-Asahi Reading Promotion Award.

Currently she is spearheading the Book Therapy Project aimed to heal children traumatised by disasters and psycho-social problems through the use of appropriate literature. In February 2012, on behalf of AWIC, she chaired a three-day International Conference on Book Therapy – Reading is Healing in New Delhi. She presented the Keynote Address – 'Reading is Healing'.

The Curse of Grass

The legend of Amrita Devi, the newly-married daughter of the village chieftain who persuades her mother-in-law and then the rest of the village women to passively resist the efforts of the *diwan* to cut down the trees still survives in folk-tale and song. It is significant that it is the women who hug the trees, and, through this brave and non-violent act fire the enthusiasm of their men to follow. Hundreds of Bishnois died, leading Mother Earth to curse the land with barrenness.

Chipko Movement

Inspired by these eighteenth- century martyrs, Chipko was revived in 1970 by female mountain-dwelling peasants from the Himalayas. Under Sunderlal Bahuguna's leadership, Chipko, which was Gandhian in spirit, took on new life. Non-violent tree- hugging has become a symbol for environmental conservation, both protection and restoration.

Protection of Trees – Gauri's Narrative

The need to protect trees in order to prevent desertification is effectively brought out through *The Curse of Grass*, in which women are the protagonists. The story is narrated from the point of view of Gauri, a thirteen-year-old Bishnoi girl. Through her the reader learns that

the Bishnois share a symbiotic relationship with the forest, which stands as a bulwark against the onslaught of the Thar Desert. Bishnois do not spare anyone who dared to assault their forests and wild animals. To them, chopping a tree is the most grievous sin. Followers of Guru Jambeshwar Maharaj, the Bishnois consider conservation as their religion.

Not Intimated by Authority

Gauri is not intimidated by the authority of the king's men who kill wild animals. She is furious that the king has forgotten his promise to ban *shikar* in the forest. "Does he want to invoke the curse of our Gods?" she fumes. (11) It is Gauri who helps Prince Rattan Singh who is hiding in the forest. She teaches him to love the land and presents him with *kejar*i seeds, which he later plants in the palace garden, symbolically acknowledging his debt to the Bishnoi.

Evocative Forest Scenes

The forest scenes in the novel are evocative: "Thick clusters of trees and hanging creepers made it hard for even the sunlight to intrude. Black bucks, great bustards, dancing peacocks. . . . Even hissing cobras and fearless fowls were her [Gauri's] friends". (9) Gauri knows the traditional secrets of survival in the forest. When her bare foot is pricked by a poisonous thorn, she pulls it out and squeezes the wound so that blood oozes out and infection is averted. The traditional medical practices learnt from her grandmother help her. When she sustains a bullet injury, the herbal medicine, made out of the produce of the forest, administered by the *vaid* (traditional physician), enables her to continue her quest to Ramsarai to enlist the help of the ruler.

Eco-friendly Bishnois

The lives of the Bishnoi are very eco-friendly. Women wear clothes brightened with vegetable dyes, and, on festive occasions, apply *mehandi* to their palms and decorate the entrances of houses with colourful figurines painted with vegetable dyes. The identification of the Bishnoi women with the forest and its animals are complete. A tiny fawn of a black buck which has been tragically killed by poachers is rescued by the tribal people. It is taken to Raaja, a new mother to nurse. This surprises, Dhai Ma, the Queen Mother. The wise old woman, Jiya smiles, "We do it all the time. The little fawns are just like our own children". (70)

Listening to the Prophetic song

The village women listen avidly to the prophetic song of the legendary Gauri and Karmani who oppose the felling of the trees to prevent a royal resort from coming up: "Sarsate roonch rakhe, tab bhi sasto jaan …(take my head, let the tree live, a noble bargain for us to give)" (51), sing the girls and then proceed to plunge daggers into their hearts to bring about a change of heart in the villains. The song extols Gauri and Karmani who were "raised in sami [*kejari*], lived in sami". (52) Jiya, the grandmother calls the sacrifice of the girls, the note of the Bishnoi creed. "We Bishnois are born to die for our land – so great, so beautiful. Without our sacred sami, Sanskrit name for *khejari*, the soil would erode, the great Luni will disappear and our green heaven would be turned into an ugly desert. If our forests live, we live". (52-53) "The Trees hold the earth and protect it from the invisible sandy monster of the desert. You can't see the monster, it is made up of tiny sand particles. Once it opens its mouth to swallow, it is too late to save yourself," she warns, and goes on to emphasize that, "The Bishnoi tribes and the stout *khejari*, alone, fought the onslaught of growing desertification". (39)

Wicked Diwan's Plan to Cut Trees

When the wicked Diwan Girdhardas plans to chop down the *kejari* trees in order to make room for a summer palace, Amrita, the newly-married village headman's daughter wants to kill herself before the Diwan's eyes like the girls in the song. She is dissuaded by her mother-in-law, the elder Amrita who tells her that her sacrifice would be futile since the Diwan had no heart. Gauri suggests helf-jestingly, "If the situation demands this and the trees are threatened just cling to the trees – Chipko! If they come to hack our trees – Chipko! Do not be scared, just Chipko! No arms, no violence is necessary for resistance. Surely, nobody can chop us all with the tree. Women can do this. It requires no special effort, only a strong indomitable will. We don't need weapons to show our anger, we only need to get rid of our fear and show our resolve". (98)

Brave Amritas

The men of the village are captured by the Diwan and forced to join the king's soldiers in clearing the forest. At this juncture, the two Amritas, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law gather the women of the village together with their inspiring words:

> "Surely we cannot fight a war but we are not weak, are we? We have the power to endure suffering and sacrifice. Don't we? We need a strong will to resist. Let us decide that we will save our trees. There is no way left for the menfolk. It is for us to show the way now. Men are doing their duty to protect us. We will do ours to protect all of us. We are equally responsible, aren't we?' she [Amrita)] asked. "We grew up under the shade of *khejari;* our children desire the same too. Are we going to leave behind a barren land captured by the Thar demon? Just because another demon wants to have his way, must we

submit? These are our trees, our land. . . . Chipko will be our war cry". (108-9)

The Battle

The soldiers with axes force the unwilling village men to come with them to cut down the trees. They are greeted by high-pitched singing. The women are dressed in their traditional bridal red and yellow sequinned *odinis*, singing with devotion –"Sarsate roonkh rakhe, tab bhi sasto jaan," the anthem of their faith. The men of the village weep. Arjun, the younger Amrita's husband, throws his axe away. The other men follow his example. The soldiers swing into action. "Then came "a shrill cry – Chipko – The women ran towards the trees and clung to them". (111) 'We won't leave the trees, Chop our heads off first, before you touch our sacred sami' Amrita declares firmly. (111) The men, too, cling to the trees and are lashed. But every time they are dragged away by the soldiers, they return. The Diwan then gives orders for his soldiers to depart, warning the villagers that he would return the next day with his men with terrible consequences if they continued their protest.

Appeal to the King

Gauri and Bhagu, her friend, meanwhile reach Dhai Ma and Rattan Singh. They find that the prince has planted a neat row of khejari trees in the palace garden, grown from the seeds given by the Ramsari people. That evening, Maharaja Abhai Singh, Rattan Singh's grandfather, announces the award of the title 'Guardians of the Forest' with accompanying rights to the Bishnois of the Thar region. So, the *khejari* forest along with the Luni River legally comes under the protection of the Bishnois.

Women Running Around the Trees Singing

Tragically, the announcement comes too late for the protesters. The desperate soldiers pull and push the women, who at first dodge, run round the trees singing. They are flogged, then dragged and kicked ruthlessly. The Bishnoi men rush to protect their womenfolk, bravely suffering the blows on their wounded backs.

Tragedy of Killing

The two Amritas cling to the trees despite warnings. The senior Amrita is beheaded, Her daughter-in-law suffers the same fate. Then it is Arjun's turn. Ten Bishnois are beheaded. "Nobody had shunned the trees. They held on to them as if they were embracing life. Tears steamed down ttheir eyes, as they repeated their song". (121)

The next day. Two young girls, Ratni and Bhagu and little five-year-old Achi, sacrifice their lives. Three hundred and twenty-three Bishnois are killed mercilessly. Jiya says, "Amrita is not dead. She'll live forever. My old eyes can see her in every sprouting sapling, all over the forest in every single *khejari*. (124)

Nothing Could Move Nature

In the Epilogue, the author writes: "Nothing could move Nature any more in Khejarli. . . . That voluminous ochre patch of earth has since remained dry, tough and barren. Surrounded by scattered clusters of khejari trees the land has not borne a solitary shrub, not a blade of grass. . . It was the curse of grass. The forests decreased. Desert spread". (127)

Thus, the drama of the colonizer and the colonized is enacted against the background of eco-feminist discourse in *The Curse of Grass*, justifying the critical statement that "environmental crisis is a feminist issue". (Curry 1)

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The Hunter as the Hunted: The Plight of the Modern Tiger in Deepak Dalal's *Ranthambore Adventure*

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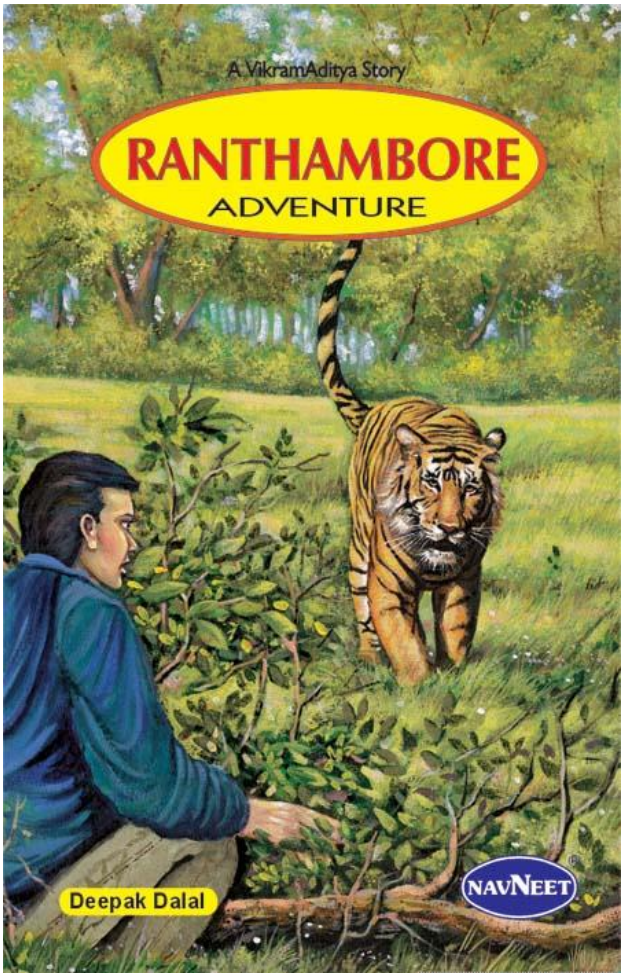


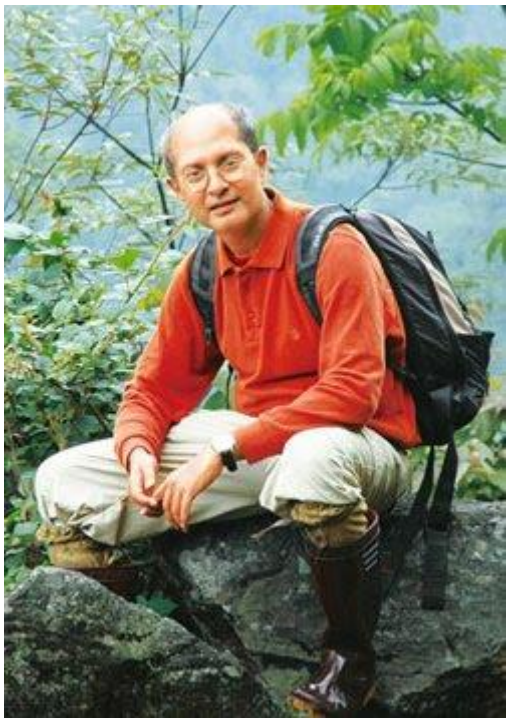
"The tiger is the greatest symbol of our national heritage and unless we save it, future generations will be unable to witness the splendour of one of nature's finest creatures." Valmik Tapar

Relationship between Literature and Physical Environment

One of the offshoots of postcolonial criticism is the rise of eco-criticism which studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It seeks to counter the anthropocentric view that tries to justify the exploitation of natural resources which spells doom to our planet. The creators of children's and young adult literature in India have always

been keenly sensitive to the need for providing a value-based experience to their young readership and so have aimed at ecological literacy. "Ecological literacy refers to conscious awareness and understanding of the relationships among people, other organisms, and the environments in which they live. Texts themselves work toward ecological literacy, whether specifically or tacitly". (Dobrin and Kidd 233)

Deepak Dalal



Deepak Dalal is one of the foremost writers of Indian young adult fiction today. A chemical engineer by profession, Deepak Dalal set out to write "Indian tales for Indian children" in 1995.Thus was born the Vikram-Aditya series of adventures, set in some of the most picturesque places in India, with a strong focus on environment and travel. With an idea towards connecting young people with the wilderness, his stories highlight issues of conservation of forests and wildlife. The stories are drawn from his own experience.

Ranthamore Adventure

In *Ranthamore Adventure*, Dalal addresses the issue of tiger poaching which is rampant in our wildlife sanctuaries. He exposes the operational tactics and network of poachers as well as the potential market for tiger bones. Dalal also portrays the noble work of dedicated forest officers.

The story is humanized by following the story of Genghis, the king of the Ranthambore tigers. Mr. Reddy, Chief Forest Officer of Ranthambore National Park, records through photographs a tigress and her cubs. The story follows the birth of the tiger cub Genghis in the cold season in the valley in between steep cliffs. The care taken by the tigress to ensure the safety and happiness of her offspring is touching. The mother tigress looks after her new-born and teaches them to take their first steps. She took many great precautions to avoid predators, especially those of the two-legged variety. "She trusted humans seated in vehicles, but humans on foot were another matter altogether". (9) She would be very still until they passed.

Narratives of Tigers and Youngsters

Deepak Dalal alternates chapters devoted to the tiger's narrative to that of youngsters Vikram, Aditya Khan and Aarti. Vikram's father heads a wildlife conservation organization, Wilderness Conservation India (WCI), where they learn about India's Tiger Crisis. Tiger bones are valued in Chinese medicine and so poaching is rampant in the sanctuaries. The poacher-smuggler nexus depletes wildlife. Aditya tells Arthi that killing wildlife for meat is forgivable; hunting for fun is unpardonable; but the worst offenders are those who hunt for profit. (15) Deepak Dalal includes information about animal behavior and human-animal conflict supported with statistical data in an ideal combination of fictitious narrative backed with solid facts in order to imbue the minds of his readers with environmental awareness.

Human Intrusion into the Sanctuary

The intrusion of people into the sanctuary disturbs its peace. Cattle-grazing is a bane to wild animals. "The presence of humans and their cattle disturbed the forest equilibrium". (72) Since the tiger's natural prey disappeared when they saw humans, the tiger was forced to hunt domestic cattle, and this caused humans to invade forests to hunt the tiger, which they perceived as the enemy. The vicious circle was initiated by human beings and led to the vilification of a beast which was naturally reclusive.

Genghis' Discovery of Mother's Skin and Flesh

One of the most pathetic episodes in the book is the discovery by Genghis of his dear mother's skin and flesh, abandoned near an unused human dwelling in the forest.

> On one side of the dwelling, he came upon portions of crumpled tiger skin. The smell of the skin had been unmistakable; the familiar, comforting, all-enveloping odour of his childhood - the scent of his mother. Whoever had killed her had sliced her body apart. Her flesh was a bloodied mess on the ground, but her bones were missing. (73)

Two of the tigress's cubs had been slaughtered along with their mother. The third had possibly escaped, but "the death-dealing humans had ensured its demise. The tiny animal was too young to hunt and there was no mother to provide for it anymore. The cub would die a slow, lingering death by starvation; or, if it were lucky, suffer a quick end at the claws of an opportunistic predator". (73) As Huggan et al. warn, "The ultimate concern about species is that they may become extinct due to human activities. . . .The death of an individual is also the death of its kind". (177)

The Cruelty of Poaching

The cruelty of poaching is graphically illustrated by Dalal when he describes how a trap, "a murderous mechanism" (74) slices into Genghis's leg: "It was as if a million ants were digging pincers within. Blood pumped forth, staining the grass red. The tiger collapsed, his calls of distress shattering the peace of the night". (74)

Early next morning, two men enter the reserve with a sack, a gun and a spear. They follow the blood trail of the wounded tiger. They had been promised Rs.10,000/- for procuring tiger pelt and bones. For this paltry sum, the equivalent of the biblical thirty pieces of silver, they are willing to deprive the country of its national animal.

Genghis Did Not Attack Humans

The encounter with Genghis is something they would never forget. The magnificent terror of the powerful beast stuns them. Still, the tiger does not strike. "Some inner sense-instilled by his mother prevented the tiger from ever attacking humans". (75) The man drops his gun when "the tiger's flaming eyes were locked with his, reflecting a terrible anger." He seemed "unable to withstand the animal's accusing glance". (75)

Poachers' Perfidy

The enormity of poachers' perfidy is exposed. Even though Genghis escapes being killed by the greedy men, he cannot fend for himself. Dalal describes the tiger's plight very accurately through the words of the Chief Forest Officer Mr.Reddy: "Can a limping tiger bring down fleet-footed deer and antelope? Even healthy tigers, with four good legs, rarely succeed". (77) The forest officials had to attempt to capture the tiger and treat him for his injury. But since traps were designed to bring about permanent disability, the tiger's chances of recovery were slim. He would have to be taken to a zoo. A wild tiger who had lost his freedom would not survive long. It would be a delayed death sentence for him.

Meanwhile, Genghis, with the tenacity inherent only in tigers, somehow overcomes his terrible pain and tries to hunt. But he is by and large unsuccessful and has to subsist on very small animals and birds. Nearing starvation, he does not care anymore and prepares to die.

Attempts to Save Genghis

The forest officials try to bait him with live prey. It is a difficult task, since, "like all wounded animals, Genghis had sought deep cover". (78) They manage to shoot a tranquilizer dart at him. But Genghis disappears, causing the officers much anxiety. The temperature of a tranquilized tiger shoots up abnormally and unless he is caught and treated, he could die. A thrilling encounter with the injured Genghis who has sought refuge in a cave follows. The drugged tiger falls down while in pursuit of a forest official and is examined and treated by a veterinarian before being released into the wild. It is due to Mr.Reddy's intervention that he is not sent to a zoo. Genghis soon regains his position as the king of Ranthambore, but not before inadvertently giving the poacher, Shankar Chand, the shock of a lifetime. The tiger survives to live a life of dignity in the sanctuary.

A Well-researched Work on Web of Life

Deepak Dalal's well-researched book, based on his actual experiences in the sanctuary, carries the message that conservation of the forest depends upon the conservation of the tiger, justifying Rachel Carson's words: "The predator and the preyed upon exist not alone, but as part of a vast web of life, all of which needs to be taken into account". (253)

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Accepting the Other: Overcoming Communal Barriers in Paro Anand's *The Wild Child and Other Stories*

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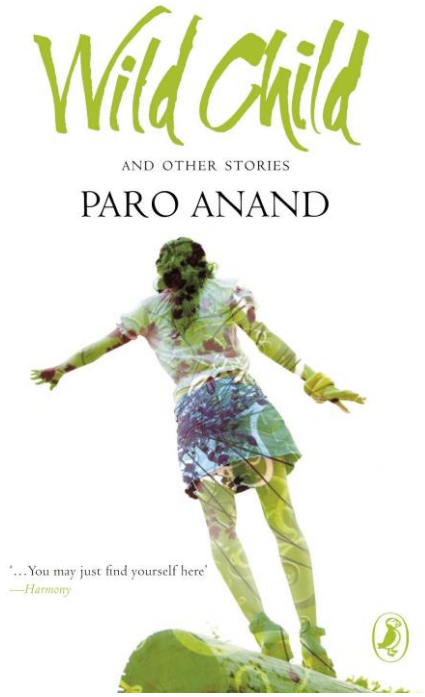

A Land of Acceptance

India is viewed as a land of acceptance, a country which is home to several major religions. Plurality based on a philosophy of inclusion has been the cornerstone of Indian society down the ages. However, in recent times, the demons of terrorism and religious bigotry have raised their ugly heads in this land of peace. Misconceptions and mutual suspicion between Hindus and Muslims have seeped down from adults to children. It is at this stage that children's literature, which has an undoubted influence on young minds, needs to jump into the fray to cleanse the evil influence of communalism and to restore the innocence of happy childhood friendships which would act as the pillars of a harmonious state in the future.

Paro Anand – A Writer of Fiction for Children and Young Adults

Paro Anand
Courtesy: www.mid-day.com

Paro Anand, one of the well-known writers of fiction for children and young adults in India has addressed the question of communal harmony is a number of works, including *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* and *Wild Child and Other Stories*. This paper is based on three of the short stories from the latter - "This is Shabir Karam," "Those Yellow Flowers of August" and "Eid."

This is Shabir Karam

"This is Shabir Karam," which is based on a true story, portrays the feelings of children from the terrorist-ravaged state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Militancy and Grief

The children, both Hindu and Muslim, have suffered personal losses and have been, as a result, psychologically affected. They find it difficult to communicate with children belonging to the other community, whom they have been taught to regard as enemies. The story is narrated from the point of view of Shabir, a fourteen-year -old Muslim boy whose parents have been killed in a bomb blast. Shabir is taken to a shelter run by NGOs for the orphans of militancy in Kashmir. The NGOs have put the Hindu and Muslim children together with hopes of fostering understanding.

Refuse to Remember Names

The grief-stricken Shabir replies in a barely audible tone when the teacher asks him his name. The children are made to play a game in which they have to remember the names of everyone in their group. Shabir hears the sharp voice of a young girl who says in an aggressive and scornful manner, "Sorry, Sir, but no way can we remember these people's names. They are so different from ours!" (12-13) Shabir is taken aback by the vehemence in the girls' statement and a shudder goes through his small frame. This is the first time that he has come across a Hindu and the girl's unfriendly behaviour creates a bad impression on him. He now tends to give credit to the stories that he had heard about the Hindus being a resentful lot who were in the habit of blaming Muslims for all their ills.

Battle Lines

Another Muslim boy consoles Shabir by saying, "Well, we can't remember *their* names either . . . after all, these Hindu names are different for us". (14) However, Shabir feels that "the battle lines were drawn and that there could never be peace between Hindus and Muslims". (14) His mind wanders to the scene of his parents' death. His gentle father, who was a vendor of beautiful Kashmir silks, and his loving mother, who had brought lunch for him, were blown up before Shabir's eyes by a suicide bomber in the market-place. Shabir now has only a piece of his father's shirt as a memento.

Friendship and Sympathy are Still Possible

Shabir now feels the eyes of the Hindu girl resting on him with a mixture of curiosity and sympathy. She has either heard his tragic story or had read the deep anguish reflected on his face. The girl, herself a victim of terrorism, instinctively empathizes with him. She smiles and pronounces his name affectionately when her turn comes. Shabir smiles back, pleased that she had remembered his name. The Hindu girl asks him a silent question by narrowing

her eyes and raising her eyebrows. In reply, he shrugs his shoulders and gives his head a slight shake.

The Bond of Loss That Unites the Children

Shabir now muses on the bond of loss that unites the children, something that he had not thought of before. He was not the only one who had suffered. "All the children here, the Muslims and the Hindus. They've all lost. They are all lost". (18) He now looks at the Hindu girl and thinks "she seems nice" and "maybe, just maybe, they can be friends, after all". (18) The story ends on a note of understanding and hope for the healing of wounds and the forging of friendships.

Those Yellow Flowers of August

"Those Yellow Flowers of August" portrays a similar story told from the point of view of a teen-aged Hindu schoolgirl, Nithya, who begins with the dramatic statement: "I HATE MUSLIMS. I always have". (99) She had, embedded in her mind, stereotypes of Muslim men as people in dark clothing with long beards and that of Muslim women as "just baby machines . . . shrouded in black." She clarifies that she hates Muslims, not because of their appearance but because "they're all first-class killers". (99) The reader learns that Nithya's father, like Shabir's, had been killed in a bomb-blast in the market place. She says, "If I could, I would kill a few [Muslims] myself. But I'm not Muslim, so, I'm not into killing". (100)

There are a few newcomers in Nithya's class, one among whom is a good-looking boy to whom she feels attracted. When the time comes for the new students to introduce themselves, she is shocked to find that the boy is a Muslim named Khalid. After that, she starts giving him furious glances.

Working in Groups – Anger, Arguments and Understanding

Nithya's class is asked to work in pairs and try to enact an impromptu play. Nithya finds herself paired with Khalid, who happens to be the only Muslim in the class. Nithya's teacher refuses her permission to change her partner. Nithya does not shake hands with Khalid. However, the boy's sense of humour and his infectious smile makes her wish that he was not a Muslim, and thus her sworn enemy. Khalid gently probes for the reason behind her anger. He then asks quietly, "Was it a Muslim or a terrorist that killed him [Nithya's father]?" He explains that "Muslim" was not synonymous with "terrorist." Nithya asks angrily, "Why not, why not? My father is dead and it was a Muslim that killed him". (106) Khalid proudly retorts that his own father was in the Indian Army and he was certainly not a terrorist. He risked his life daily to protect his country. "He's trying to stop more Nithyas from losing their fathers". (106)

Khalid's words bring a feeling of normalcy to Nithya who is then able to smell the flowers that surround her, the "yellow flowers of August" (107), which symbolize life and happiness. The patience and affection of the Muslim boy brings about a healthy change in the mindset of the traumatized Nithya.

Eid

"Eid" is set in the aftermath of the Mumbai bomb blasts. Eleven-year-old Ayub comes tearfully back home from school with the question, "Papa, are we Muslims?" (100) Ayub is taunted by his classmate Shaan and his gang call him a traitor and ask him, "Do you drink blood instead of milk?" Shaan states callously, "It's you guys who do it every time . . .You Mossies are just killers". (110) That particular day, the gang had crossed all limits of decency and had resorted to physical violence. Young Ayub repeats to his father fearfully, "They say, 'we should kill all Muslims and only then will the world be peaceful". (112)

Direct Approach to Clarity

Ayub's parents take quick action. After consulting the school authorities and obtaining their permission, they go to Ayub's class and address the children. Ayub's parents reveal that theirs is an inter-religious marriage. Ayub's father is a Muslim and his mother, a Christian. They read out to the class passages from the holy books of different religions which all advocate peace and brotherhood. They explain that they celebrate festivals of all religions at home, but in a thoroughly secular manner. The bully, Shaan and the rest of the class are taken aback by this direct approach. Shaan "could hardly believe his ears" (115) when Ayub's mother invites all the children, including him, to celebrate Eid at their home. The children are filled with shame and remorse.

Eid Celebration with All

When the first car arrives, Ayub feels "almost faint with surprise, joy and terror". But his mother stands by his side and reassures him with a "small, secret squeeze" on his shoulder. (116) Together with Ayub's father, they welcome the guests to Ayub's first official Eid. Ayub is thus happily accepted into the peer group.

A Call for Understanding and Amity

Paro Anand's sensitive stories focus on the adverse effects of terrorism, religious prejudice, suspicion, hatred and stereotyping during the crucial formative stage in the lives of the citizens of tomorrow. She suggests amity, empathy born of mutual suffering and forgiveness as antidotes to the poison of religious intolerance that threatens our nation.

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Zai Whitaker's Andamans Boy: A Critique of Postcolonial 'Development'

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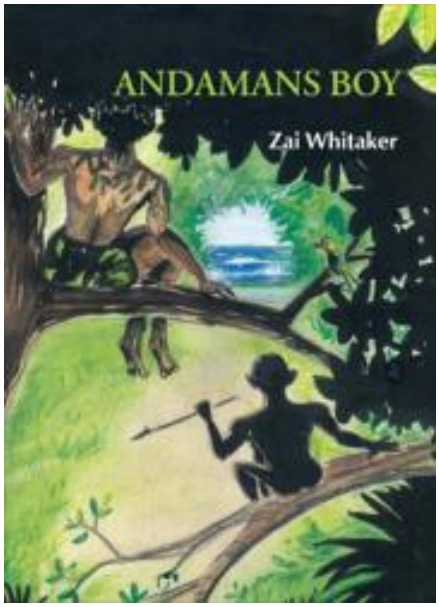

On Defining Development

One of the central tasks of postcolonial eco-criticism has been to contest western ideas of development (Huggan and Tiffin 27). These ideas, based on occidental consumerism, took root during colonization and continued thereafter in the new avatar of neo-colonization, resulting in the wiping out of the traditional societies by the dominant culture. Concern for indigenous people and the dangers to their environment has also pervaded the area of children's literature.

Zai Whitaker's Interest in Ecological and Environmental Issues

Zai Whitaker, niece of Dr.Salim Ali, the Birdman of India, is one of the foremost writers of Indian children's fiction today. She has dealt extensively with ecological and environmental issues in her works. *Andamans Boy* portrays the life of the reclusive Jarawa tribe of the Andaman Islands, who lead a symbiotic existence with their surroundings.

Author, naturalist and educator Zai Whitaker has written a dozen books, most of them for children and young readers. She writes about wildlife and conservation. Her interest in this area started when she was a young girl in Mumbai, because of the several naturalists in her family. These included Dr Salim Ali the ornithologist, who is known as the Bird Man of India. After college, Zai worked at the Snake Park and Crocodile Bank in Chennai. At both places, she spoke and wrote about the fascinating lives of these animals, and the importance of protecting them. She has studied and worked with people of the Irula community, who are snake catchers. Zai is a director of the Irula Tribal Women's Welfare Society, which helps the community in many ways. Zai enjoys writing both fiction and non-fiction, and also poetry. Her story "What Happened to the Reptiles", with its message of communal harmony, is being used by several human rights groups to discuss this important issue with youngsters

Through the Eyes of Arif, a Rich but Orphan Boy

Through the eyes of the ten-year old orphan boy Arif, the reader gets to know about the attempts made by unscrupulous land developers and timber merchants to influence government officials to lure them away to settlements in the name of tribal welfare. Deliberate misinformation about the tribe's fierceness and alleged atrocities is spread abroad in order to garner public support for their transportation.

The ten-year-old rich but ill-treated orphan boy, Arif, runs away from his foster parents in crowded Mumbai. He takes a train to Chennai and thereafter manages to board a ship heading towards the Andaman and Nicobar islands. He is excited by the prospect of going there, since his school textbooks have taught him about the "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) But nothing prepares him for the actual contact with the stunning biodiversity of the region which he experiences on arrival.

On Board the Ship

On board the ship, Arif witnesses the adaptive behavior of the seagulls who relish the south Indian snacks brought by the travellers. He is surprised because "in science books birds always picked up worms and insects. . . . they had changed their habits to survive in their new environment of crowds and garbage.

Mistaken Identity

Arif is mistaken for the boy who is in charge of looking after the goats which are to be ceremoniously handed over to the tribal people as part of the TUS (Tribal Upliftment Scheme). He learns that this is done as part of a publicity campaign. It is a well-known fact that introduction of new species into an ecosystem disrupts the food chain and ultimately leads to the destruction of the habitat. So, trying to befriend and "tame" the Jarawa by making them bring up livestock, goes against the laws of ecology.

Nature as Surrogate Mother for Arif

Nature plays the role of surrogate mother to Arif, in the absence of his real one. "From now on, he tells himself, 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)

The Jarawas

The talk on the ship turns to the Jarawa tribe, the original inhabitants of the islands. The sea near the Jarawa Reserve is rich in fish, but anyone who ventures there is met with a

shower of arrows. The Jarawa, which meant "The Other", like to lead exclusive lives and avoid contact with outsiders. Some of the people on the ship call them "barbarians" and say that they should be wiped out with machine guns. But Uncle, Arif's mentor asks, "Whose land is it please? Who broke the law and trespassed?" (Whitaker 44) Shomitra, one of the passengers agrees: "It's their land, and they're dependent on it for food, water, medicines, everything. After all, when the Pakistanis cross into our territory we fight them don't we?" (Whitaker 44)

Fairy Tales?

The Jarawa stories seem like fairy tales to Arif, who wonders whether there were still people who had never seen or used money, bread, butter, shoes, books, rice or sugar. The northernmost group, which still refused contact with outsiders, shot arrows at the sacks of gifts sent by the government as gestures of goodwill, and dumped them into the sea. "They didn't want trash like cloth and buckets. Instinctively, they seemed to know that their survival depended on being left alone". (Whitaker 45) Yet one group, the Friendly Jarawa as they were called, had started accepting gifts. Hence, they were in danger. Quite insensitive to the greatness of tribal society, a passenger callously remarks that they had to adapt since "they can't go on living like junglees forever". (Whitaker 45)

Arif Gaining Ground

Arif first works in a zoo, but later escapes to Twin Island because there is a nation-wide search for him. He builds a hut there and spends his days among the coral reefs, getting familiarized with his new habitat. He meets the Jarawa boy Eetha Aleho while swimming in the water. To his surprise he finds that he is rescued from drowning by "the hostile, uncivilized" Jarawas. (Whitaker 108) Despite their ignorance of each other's language, the boys communicate and soon they become friends. The Jarawa boy offers Arif a piece of

sweet honey-comb and introduces his friend to some marine life. But very soon an arrow hits Arif. Eetha protects Arif and introduces him to his parents. He tells his father that it was Arif who saved him from drowning. His suspicious father does not believe this story and demands to know whether Arif had won Eetha's friendship with gifts of food. He is also worried that Arif is not alone and that others have used him to get access to their closed community.

Joining the Jarawa

After much discussion, they decide that the boy is harmless and decide to take him along to their forest. Their caution is well-founded because the Andamanese, who had mingled with the mainland people had fallen prey to alcohol and diseases. Their population had fallen from 4,000 to practically zero in fifty years, after the misery and confusion of losing their land, culture and identity.

Arif enjoys living in the Jarawa homeland. The people there eat natural, locally grown food without salt. There are heated discussions among the women about the pros and cons of life before the "outside things came". (Whitaker 120) Huwaned ame, a wise old woman says that one had to beware of things that were too easy. They call the intruders "ghost people." "Our grandfathers and fathers talked of a time when there were no ghost people. Only our type of people. Then suddenly there were ghost people everywhere and the forest people disappeared". (Whitaker 121) Gifts such as red plastic buckets and red cloth have won the hearts of some tribal women and their unity has been disrupted. "Our minds have broken wings,' says Natalang Kaye. (Whitaker 121) The outsiders offend the dignity of the indigenous people. Kaye says, "They tell us to dance, and laugh at us They look at us as we look at some rare kind of sea creature . .. hmm, interesting, the way it moves . . ." (Whitaker 121) Arif recalls how the Onge tribe of Little Andaman island, were wiped out once they started adopting the 'civilized' way of life.

Sensible Habits of Jarawa

Whitaker tells us that the Jarawa have sensible habits. They cleanse their hands with a purifying mud before eating. Local produce ensure a balanced diet. They carefully clean their pearly-white teeth with fishbones. Pregnant women are given nutritious food. There is a peaceful social order. They depend on consensus; rarely is there any split among them because of differences of opinion. Whenever one of them is in danger, there is an unspoken law that all the other members of the tribe follow him to help. Yet, European culture and those who fall under its influence view indigenous cultures as "primitive". (Huggan and Tiffin 5)

Collecting Gifts from Ship

A big launch called the M.Y. Nicobar comes close offshore; the Jarawa swim to it to receive their gifts. Some of the manners of the tribal girls are embarrassing to the mainland people. Even Arif thinks that the tribals behave like beggars, but soon reasons that they have no idea about possessions and take what they like, just as they would pick fruit from a tree in the forest. One of the mainlanders, a government official, comments: "See how shamelessly they snatch up everything! Sharmaji [a higher government official] will be pleased". (Whitaker 123) The official is happy that there has been an improvement from the previous year, when the gift-dropping did not elicit much response His remark shows that the Jarawa are weakening in their resolve to remain independent.

Ill-conceived Plan of Government Officials

The government officials, who had no idea that Arif could overhear them, talk to each other about their plans. They would give some of the tribal children a ride on their boats and whisk them away to the Jarawa home in Port Blair. This would aid in the promotion of

Sharmaji, because then his minister could fly down and be photographed with the children. The Jarawa children would not be sent back, but be given gifts of red cloth and plastic buckets and would "soon appreciate the conveniences of modern life – electricity, running water, proper clothes". (Whitaker 125) A man, whose name is Rahul, remarks sarcastically, "Oh yes. So they can be like us. And we, of course, are the best!"(Whitaker 125) The older man does not like this attitude. He asserts that the Jarawa are living on the Government of India's land. Rahul, defending the rights of the indigenous people retorts, "They were here much before the Government of India was even dreamed of". (Whitaker 125) Rahul's superior warns him that he would not get promoted if he "talks like a revolutionary." But Rahul says that the new Prime Minister is against the exploitation of the tribals. The government official says, "The Government is going to make over a hundred crores from these forests. We will have 700 square kilometers to parcel out to settlers. Don't you think that's more important than 300 junglees who can't even read and write?" (Whitaker126) Here, the ethical and legal rights of tribals as well as the efforts of the dominant society to absorb them and thereby lay claim to their land is seen. Whitaker's views are in keeping with postcolonial eco-criticism which is "morally attuned to the continuing abuses of authority that operate in humanity's name'. (Huggan and Tiffin 13)

No Understanding of Hypocrisy and Betrayal

Arif's attempts to explain to the Jarawa the perfidy of the government officials is at first meet with disbelief since the latter have no idea what hypocrisy and betrayal were. They also cannot grasp the concept of money and the greed that it engenders. But after great effort and much discussion, they decide to defy the officials and to refuse their gifts. The Jarawa men, including Arif, who has been accepted into the tribe, hide in the trees and shoot arrows at the huge mound of worthless "gifts" brought by the "ghost people". Arif recognizes the

Prime Minister of India (whose description fits the late A.K. Gujaral) among those who land. The Prime Minister is under the impression the Jarawa have voluntarily agreed to leave for the Jarawa home. When he finds that they are being lured away by gifts, he categorically states that he does not want any of his citizens to be kidnapped. He orders the officials not to send any more gift boats, but to leave the Jarawa in peace. His calm bearing and fearless attitude wins the admiration of the Jarawa chieftain, who comes down from his tree and presents the delighted Prime Minister with his bow and arrows.

Imposition of Tourism to the Jarawa Land

Arif is happy that his warning has been heeded by the tribe. He had previously been confused as to whether his call for ignoring the gift boats was justified. But the pieces of conversation he overhears at Port Blair about the proposed tourism to the Jarawa Reserve the next year after it was "cleared," the value of the land as real estate and the profits to be derived from the sale of timber, convince him that the forest people and with them, their environment, were in grave danger. Arif's action saves the whole ecosphere. He continues to live as one of the Jarawa, turning his back on "civilization," and the enormous fortune awaiting him at Mumbai. Arif's decision is not a romantic celebration of "the noble savage", but a mature choice based on experienced reality.

Myths of Development Exposed

Thus, in Andamans Boy, Whitaker exposes myths of development – "amenity," "benefit," "improvement" (Huggan and Tiffin 71) for what they are - masks of exploitation by the dominant majority. The description of the flora and fauna of the land, as well as the Jarawa way of life is realistic, since it is based on actual first-hand research by the author. This mingling of fact and fiction has the desired effect of instilling ecological and sociological values in young minds.

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Healing the Hurt - Resolution of Man-Animal Conflict in Leela Gour Broome's *Flute in the Forest*

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A Variety of Themes in Children's Literature

Children's literature in India has come of age with a plethora of themes relevant to contemporary needs. Creating awareness about environmental issues is viewed as a priority by creators of Indian children's fiction.

Bringing about Positive Changes

Leela Gour Broome

Leela Gour Broome has worked with children since 1983, initially as a music, mime and dance teacher with several schools. In 1990 she and her husband moved to their farm in Pune and opened nature and environment education camps for 7-12 yr olds, the first residential camps for this age group in India, at the time. Since 2006, she has been writing fiction, publishing my work in local papers for children. Running nature and environment camps nurtured her understanding of YA 12+ generation, and she soon realized there was an enormous dearth of books relevant to this age group. Her first published book, Flute in the Forest, has however been inspired by her years living on the tea estates, and several trips through the forests of South India over the past 35 years.

Leela Gour Broome, a Pune-based writer and environmentalist whose first published novel for older children, *Flute in the Forest* is based on the author's personal experiences in the forests of southern India. It is the tale of how a young girl brings about a positive change in the lives of both an embittered old man and a wild elephant through the combined power of love and music.

Physically Challenged Ariya Sardare and Her Achievements

Thirteen-year-old Atiya Sardare is the physically-challenged daughter of Forest Officer Ram Deva Sardare. She is used to various forests and sanctuaries in South India, since her father has been transferred from and moved to different sanctuaries. Wherever he is posted, her father and his dedicated team considered it "their" forest and would not tolerate poachers. Atiya is taught to respect the forest and its rightful inhabitants. 'It is the home of the wild animal,' her father had instructed, 'We are only guest in the jungle. Like a good guest, you must be quiet and respect their space'. (4)

Rangappa the Rogue Elephant

Atiya hears stories of the rogue elephant, Rangappa, the menace of the sanctuary. Rangappa, who terrorizes the region, is a loner with long tusks. The Kurumba tribal people who inhabit the forest avoid him because he is unpredictable. Usually, if the tribal people came across a herd of elephants at night along their usual route, they would collectively yell: "Ayyapppa, po! Ayyappa, po!" (god, go!). "Somehow the elephants understood the people's fear. Slowly and quietly the huge animals would walk back into the forest and leave the people alone". (27) However, Rangappa was different. He seemed to enjoy frightening people, as if he had a grudge against mankind. He used to appear suddenly, then make a mock charge, but never actually hurting anyone.

German Photographer Crushed

However, things took an ugly turn when the German photographer, Mr. Kronhaage came too close, despite the warnings from the animal, who was in (seasonal frenzy of the male in heat) *musth.* The angry elephant lifted the photographer and his camera clean off the ground, threw them down and stamped on them. This is described by father to daughter, perhaps to make her realize the very real dangers of the forest and understand, how respecting the private spaces of animals was a prerequisite to survival.

Nine Deaths to Rangappa's Record – Why These Deaths Were Caused?

Rangappa, when provoked turned into a killer and had nine deaths to his record. Some people were demanding that he be shot: "They were discussing Rangappa as if he was an evil criminal", Atiya thinks sadly, and wonders quite correctly: "Why do we humans always think we can reason things out better than the animals who share the earth with us?. . .. If Kronhaage had given some more space to Rangappa; if he had not invaded it with total disrespect for the animal, things could have been different". (113)

Another example of how human ignorance of animal psychology can prove disastrous is demonstrated through the incident of the encounter of Atiya's bus with the rogue elephant. When the inexperienced bus driver comes across Rangappa on the slope of a narrow road, he raises the engine and honks his horn while the passengers scream hysterically, stand up and make more noise. They do not pause to think that wild animals are used to the peace of the forest, are upset by the discordant noises of human habitations.

The infuriated elephant, is unable to bear the horrifying racket, mock-charges, "then he backs off, ears flapping in fury, his front feet and trunk stirring up the mud on the roadside in a mass of brown dust". (114) Suddenly, the bus passengers who do all the wrong things, hear the most terrifying sound from the animal's throat - "A deep, menacing, stupefying rumble that kept on and on and on! No sound they had heard was o terrifying as this one!" (114) "He pulled branches and leaves, tufts of grass and bits of sticks and hurled them towards the bus, growling deep in his throat". (115) The sequence of events of this man-animal conflict situation is described by the author with immense drama, and realism.

Possible Positive Steps Not to Infuriate Elephants

It is the wise young Atiya who takes over by asking the driver to shut off the engine and keep quiet. The villagers tell the driver to listen to her because she is the forest officer's daughter and so probably had sound knowledge about the ways of wild animals. Gradually, the elephant calms down, turns back and then walks down a slope. Thus, disaster is averted by using animal psychology, through the young girl's wisdom.

Calming Techniques

Atiya uses the same calming technique with 'Ogre Uncle,' the aged anthropologist who lives on the edge of the forest. He is old, blind and embittered. He vents his anger,

stemming from helplessness, on his daughter, Mishori, who patiently bears his tantrums. The girl, whose late mother was a tribeswoman, has keen insight into the nature of both human and animal, and perceives similarities between the two:

> 'I think I can see why the elephant is so bad-tempered,' Mishora said with sympathy, 'People probably do no leave him in peace. The jungles are getting smaller all the time, less wild and there are more and more of us around. How can the poor beast stay aloof, when there are so many 'invasions' into his private space?' (126)

Humans and Elephants – Ogre Uncle and Rangappa Story

Atiya too understands that Ogre Uncle and Rangappa were "two of a kind", (133) separated from fellow beings, sick and misunderstood. When she describes the large, lonely animal to her mentor, she deliberately draws parallels in an effort to effect a change in the old man's attitude. She says that Rangappa is a shrewd and clever animal, who longs for recognition. When he does not get the required attention from his fellow elephants, he tries to attract attention to himself by uprooting trees and terrifying human beings.

The old man plays the flute beautifully, and Atiya becomes a worthy pupil. Soon, the trilling, warbling bird notes of the tribal bamboo instrument fill the clearing. It has a soothing effect on Atiya, who is hurt because of the rude behavior of her classmates who ignore her because of her handicap. It also begins to have the same effect on the isolated Ogre Uncle and, quite unexpectedly, on Rangappa. The music of the wind passing through the bamboo groves in the forest attracts the elephant, who has been isolated both from its kind and from the human race. It is revealed that Rangappa was once a domesticated elephant who turned wild due to grief when its keeper died.

Ranngappa appears silently and stands on the opposite bank of the river when the music lessons begin. The elephant listens to their voices and smells them from afar with his trunk. "Yes, he is mean and nasty and doesn't like people", Atiya informed him [Ogre Uncle] quietly". (131) She speculates that Rangappa could be unwell or old. "Her father had often told her [Atiya] that these mighty animals couldn't see too well, but they had a very keen hearing and a sense of smell. They also had very good memories".(132)

Ogre Uncle becomes intensely interested in the pachyderm. Atiya wants to teach him, and the elephant, to trust humanity again. "My father once told me that in life, everything is symbiosis, an inner-dependency that is constant and needed for life to be meaningful. We must teach him that he needs us as much as we need him", (134) Atiya tells Ogre Uncle.

When Atiya plays tribal music on her lf flute, the great elephant flaps his ears in appreciation. He watches them and then silently leaves after the lesson is over. This happens every day. "It was almost a spiritual moment when the Ogre and Rangappa had stared silently and with mutual respect for each other". (138)

Ogre Uncle begins to appreciate Mishora's loving care and Atiya's talent. He wants his young pupil to carry on his research on the Kurumba tribe. The author goes on to say, "The elephant now looked a gentle, grey giant cuddly toy, harmless and not menacing at all". (150) The gradual change in his personality is noted by the rangers and the tribals. No one except Atiya knows the reason for his transformation.

Rangappa appears to inform Atiya that Ogre uncle is dying. He knows instinctively He comes to the far end of her garden, trumpeting to call attention. Atiya talks to him. Ram Sardare wonders at their communication and closeness. The non-threatening aspect of the killer elephant astonishes the forest officer and he begins to appreciate Atiya's music.

What Makes Them Misfits

It is the truauma of loss - his wife in the case of Ogre Uncle and his mahout in the case of Rangappa that makes them misfits. Thus, the human and the animal are not so very different "Recognised as a cornerstone of deep ecological thinking, identification constitutes an awareness that humans are inextricably enmeshed in broader bio-social relations". (Curry 161) It is the healing power of patience, affection and music which brings peace to the hearts of both. Integration with the harmony of nature, signified by the flute, proves that "both are related to a fuller context". (Danby 53) One may conclude with the words of Atiya's song:

> The Breeze blows my song through the ancient Forest, / Hear it, my Friend, oh hear it, then!/ Casting a spell over all us Creatures . . / Peace, it says, is a Friend we all can share, / Join hands . . . and . . . catch the Breeze! (193)

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Ecological Perspective in Vandana Singh's *Younguncle Comes to Town*

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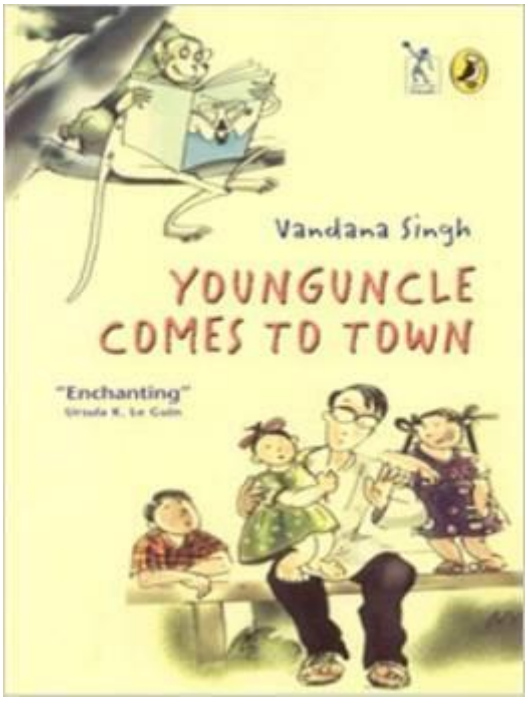

Small Town Setting and Wodehousean Humour

Younguncle Comes to Town, a collection of short stories by Vandana Singh reflects her life-long interest in ecology and the natural environment. All the five stories in this collection, especially the title story, "Younguncle Comes to Town," and also "Younguncle and the Monkey Summer" and "Younguncle's Village Visit" contain descriptions of trees, birds and animals, though they mostly have a small-town setting. The Wodehousean humour of the author ensures that ecological wisdom blends well with the text, avoiding platitudes and the overt moralizing tone that were the drawbacks of children's fiction in previous times.

A Grownup with a Heart of a Kid

Even in the introductory story, the reader gets the impression that Younguncle, "a grownup with the heart of a kid", as Sangeetha Barooah puts it, is a person who lives in harmony with his environment. He does not get irritated because he is rain-soaked.

Younguncle "was looking about him with eyes full of approval, as though the rainstorm had been just the thing he had ordered with his lunch". (4) He deliberately lets rain drops fall into the earthern tea-cup that has brought back from his train journey and scratches a nearby buffalo's head in a friendly manner. Younguncle's intrinsic love of nature perhaps springs from his experiences of living close to nature in his native village. Thus, character is influenced by setting.

Display of Eco-friendly Behaviour

Younguncle definitely displays eco-friendly behaviour .Coming to stay with his brother and his family, he appears with an odd tin plate on his head. Younguncle explains that he had exchanged his umbrella for the tinplate to feed birds. He is not afraid to appear ridiculous, when he knows that what he is doing is good. "A mere umbrella for this antique plate in which three generations of bird-sellers have fed their stock and fended off the rain" (6) He does not bring his things in plastic suitcases, but in "wooden cases covered with soggy newspaper". (7)

Releasing the Birds in Cages of Wire and Wood

The reader learns that he had bought a number of birds imprisoned in "small, crude cages made of wire and wood" (5) at the railway station. They are not presents for his nephew and nieces. He had bought them in order to release them, and he does so in front of the children, teaching them an invaluable lesson. The birds fly away in "a great flurry of wings and colours". (5)

Eco-friendly Gifts

Younguncle brings the children small gifts that are definitely eco-friendly and are meant to inculcate in them the love of nature. His suitcase "was filled to the brim with the

most unusual things. An enormous conch shell he had found on the shores of the Arabian Sea, a fragile piece of coral that had been washed up on the beach in the Andaman islands, a sculpture of twisted vines that been given to him by an artistically inclined monkey from the forests of Assam . . .". (7) It is to be noted that it is "washed up coral," which has not been deliberately broken off from a reef by humans. By acknowledging the artistic tendencies of monkeys, Younguncle endows them with the right to be treated on par with mankind. Indeed, the children hear that "He had been kidnapped as a child by the monkeys of Govindpur temple and returned safely to his family after a wild joy-ride among the trees". (35)

The Monkey Summer

"Younguncle and the Monkey Summer" deals with the problem of animal-human encounters that take place during times of scarcity. The scorching summer had deprived the monkeys in the forest of water. This could be because human habitations had invaded monkey territory. This is implied by the semi-urban small-town setting of the stories. The monkeys, upset by lack of food and water in their home territory, are forced to seek the same in the town. ." Troupes of thirsty monkeys come into town to eat fruit and steal whatever little water was used for vegetable gardens". (35) Though people were afraid of monkeys, they considered them to be sacred, so they were left undisturbed. Thus, traditional beliefs help in the conservation of nature.

Younguncle's Precaution

The monkeys play havoc in all the gardens, except that of Younguncle's brother. This is probably due to Yunguncle's friendship with the monkeys and also due to his precaution. He provides drinking water and gives them small presents of fruits, instead of driving them away, which would have been a futile effort. He shows that humans and their animal neighbours can live in harmony, each helping the other in times of need. It is seen that

elephants who invade human habitations, do not harm people who have a supply of water ready for them. The children and their uncle play ball with the simians. This helps Younguncle to lead the monkeys to the rescue of the cow, Janaki, who had been stolen by the avaricious Paytu Lal.

Monkeys Using the Hand Pump for Water

The monkeys do not stay all summer. Yusuf, Younguncle's friend, a wildlife expert, begins an innovative project to restore water supply to the forest. In a small clearing in the camp, Yusuf had a well dug and topped with a hand-pump. "The monkeys learned to use this in no time and shared the water with "creatures not blessed with opposable thumbs". (50)

Learning a Variety of Words

Vandana Singh names a number of birds, animals, trees and fruits in her short stories. In the first story, for example, Younguncle's benevolence extends to "green and yellow parakeets, tiny multi-coloured munias, dove and pigeons with iridescent wings. (6) The neem, banyan, shishum and guava trees feature in the stories. Younguncle's friend Yusuf, is a wildlife expert "who could make the most amazing animal noises" to entertain the children. Notable are his imitations of a "dyspeptic water buffalo" and "a hoolock gibbon in full howl" (53). He brings them a picture book full of all kinds of animals.

Exceptional Description of Nature

The stories contain exceptional descriptions of nature. Younguncle , on entering his brother's gate sees the "Lush, rain-soaked garden and the dripping trees". (3) Seasonal changed is described poetically: "Summer had been washed away by the monsoons, and after a month of steady rain, the clouds receded to make way for the cooler season". (50) During the bus-ride to his native village, Younguncle sees that "The fields were yellow with mustard

flowers as far as eye could see and here and there were dark smudges of mango groves. Water gleamed in nearby creeks where children bathed and splashed, and little thatched-hut villages appeared like mushrooms in the midst of the fields". (54) In the Neelamgiri Sanctuary, "The forest rose up into the distant blue hills, and the birds anticipated the dawn with a cacophony of sound". (75) Bakvasnaath, the family ghost, makes his feelings known by sending down "a gentle shower of leaves". (90) It is to be noted that though the story has a small-town setting, the charms of the countryside lie within it, as seen in the descriptions of bullock-carts and muddy roads and in the near-rustic simplicity of the household. As Kamala Platt observes, "In an Indian home, nature is not separate from home". (195)

Safety for the Sanctuary

Younguncle becomes a hero when, in "Younguncle's Village Visit," he saves the Neelamgiri Wildlife Sanctuary and its pride, a grand old tiger, from the clutches of the Gobarmal clan, who had been terrorizing the area for generations. Yusuf, the wildlife expert shares with Yunguncle his concern for the safety of the Neelamgiri national Sanctuary. It is a small, protected forest, "one of the last resorts of the Indian tiger". (54) But all the forest rangers he appoints leave after a week or so without putting forth any reason. He requests his friend to look into the mystery.

Travel by the Bullock Cart

Younguncle leaves for his father's village where he had "spent memorable summers as a schoolboy". (50) His great-uncle and great aunt, Ancient Uncle and Ancient Aunty live there. Younguncle is met on the way by Ancient Uncle driving a bullock cart. Bira, his bullock goes very fast because of his friendship with Hira, the horse. "Bira moved like a great, humped mountain, streaks of dust and sweat gathering on his white flanks". (60) The bullock-cart overtakes the bus with ease! Due to his friendship with Hira, Ancient Uncle's

swift horse, Bira runs much faster than the average bullock. Vandana Singh's domestic animals, be they Ramu's cow Janaki who produces the "best, tastiest, richest milk in town" (50), or Hira and Bira, leave a mark on the mind.

Ancient Uncle and Aunty – Their Love for Sanctuary: Gobarmal Story

Gobarmal the Younger and his family, the local landlords, had been terrorizing the area for generations. They regularly violate the Neelamgiri Sanctuary. "Sanctuary-banctuary!" Ancient Uncle said scornfully, "It is used by the Gobarmal clan as their private hunting ground, and nobody can stop them". (65) There was a room in their mansion filled whith the heads of all the animals they had killed in the forest. - "Deer, bears, panthers, and probably a tiger or two" (65).

Ancient Uncle says that there was an old tiger there that Gobarmal had been trying to hunt for years unsuccessfully. Younguncle cleverly learns when the next tiger-hunt is to take place and goes to the Neelamgiri forest. He feels the irony in the sign which says, "Neelamgiri Wildlife Sanctuary: No Hunting". (73)

Younguncle finds that Gobarmal's men had dug a huge pit to entrap the beast. He waits for old Gobarmal and his foolish young son to come. Knowing jungle etiquette, Younguncle does not make any sudden moves and so does not frighten off the ducks in the pond. He is also able to get into close proximity with the tiger that comes to the pond to drink water. In contrast, Gobarmal and son do not care to be quiet. They bring with them a donkey as bait and also a huge quantity of food for themselves.

Honouring and Offering to the Old Tiger

Younguncle quietly departs with the food; Younguncle pays obeisance to the old tiger when he meets him and places the food on a platform as offering. The old tiger relishes the

spread, feeling that "all that he had that before this banquet seemed crude by comparison". (80) Younguncle's action of feeding the tiger human food, could off course be construed as unwise ecologically, but seen in the context of the plot, makes good sense. Thanks to Younguncle's efforts, the grand old tiger escapes falling victim to Gobarmal. The erring duo is humiliated in public and the people lose their fear of the erstwhile tyrants.

After the defeat of Gobarmal, the new park ranger had no trouble. Yusuf says, "Nobody hunts in the forest any more". (92) However, the ranger soon finds work of a different kind on his hands. The old tiger, unable to hunt, raids his kitchen and comes there regularly for meals, having developed a taste for fine cuisine. The ranger becomes the tiger's cook. The tiger has a surprising partiality to spinach paneer. But Vandana Singh implies that it is better that the tiger becomes a spinach-eater rather than a man-eater.

Good versus Bad

Simplicity marks "good" character such as Younguncle and Ancient Uncle, whereas the "bad" ones such as Gobarmal and Paytu Lal are huge consumers. Gobarmal steals Hira the horse. He has a huge mansion, hunts for trophies and is a glutton. Paytu Lal maintains a luxurious garden of fruit trees behind his high walls even when the village and the nearby forest reels under water scarcity. He steals Janaki the cow. It is seen that the villains are rich and powerful, displaying Vandana Singh's eco-Marxist leanings.

Vandana Singh's *Younguncle Comes To Town* justifies eco-critical examination is seen in the interaction between character and setting, descriptions of the landscape, fauna and flora; in the attitudes displayed; portrayal of eco-friendly and eco-activist behavior as well as in representation of ecological problems such as animal-human encounters and poaching. The success of the stories led the author to write *Younguncle in the Himalayas*, which deals with deforestation and a Chipko-like resistance movement.

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The Power of Sanctuary: Animals and Humans in Ranjit Lal's *The Small Tigers of Shergarh*

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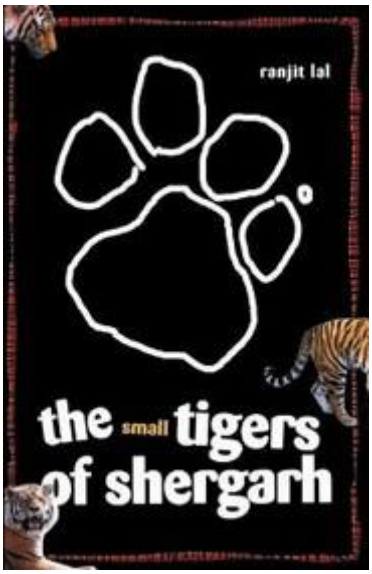

Ranjit Lal is one of the prominent faces of contemporary English-language fiction for children and young adults. Besides being a novelist, he is a freelance writer and columnist. His books include *The Crow Chronicles*, *Faces in the Water*, *Battle for No.19* and *Mostly Birds, Some Monkeys and a Pest*. His works are marked by humour and satire.

Ranjit Lal

Ranjit Lal is a freelance writer cum columnist for over two decades. He has written over 1,000 articles, short stories, features and photo-features that have been published in over 50 newspapers and magazines. He writes on natural history (birds and birding), photography (birds and nature), humour, satire and automobiles. He also writes for children and young

adults. He says his books are "for everyone from age 10 to 100."

Ranjit Lal brings a keen eye and a robust sense of humour to his writings on birds, animals and insects. In That *Summer at Kalagarh*, his first with Tulika, elephants had starring roles. Korean rights for the book have been sold. Then followed *Birds from my Window*. The third, a picture book called *Dancing Bees*, heads into the mad, mad world of creepy crawlies. Ranjit has published prolifically and lives in New Delhi. His young adult book, *Faces in the Water*, has won widespread critical acclaim, and the hugely popular *The Small Tigers of Shergarh.*

The Theme of *The Small Tigers of Shergarh*

The Small Tigers of Shergarh by Ranjit Lal has as its theme the healing power of nature. Two traumatized children are the survivors of a car crash in which they lose their parents. Physically, they are unscathed but mentally affected. Fourteen-year-old Shikha keeps hearing loud crashing sounds in her head and her brother, five-year-old Sunny, is unable to speak and keeps clinging to her. The Shergarh Tiger Reserve and National Park, which forms the background to the story, is according to the author, based on Ranthambore.

The Characters of the Novel

The protagonists (human) are the teen-aged girl, Shikha, her traumatised five-year-old brother, Sunny, Binoy Chacha, her uncle, field Director Mr. Rana of Shergarh Tiger Reserve, and Aslambhai, a retired forest guard. Ali, his mischievous grandson and Veena aunty a.k.a. 'Snail Snot are also a big part of the action. The tigers are Shahenshah, Sheeba and Shaitan.

Unforgettable Description of the Landscape

Ranjit Lal is almost Hemingwayesque in his description of the landscape. On the train journey to Shergarh, "Large birds of prey wheeled and screamed against a blue sky, shimmering in the heat. . . . occasionally the Gypsy sped past the horrid laughing skeleton of some poor cow or buffalo that had just lain down here and died" (8). The landscape reflects Shikha's state of mind. "There were no proper trees, just thorn bushes and scrub, and sometimes a defiant acacia, as crooked and twisted by the harsh environment, being attacked by rangy looking goats". (2)

Effective Animal Imagery to Describe Humans

Lal uses animal imagery to describe humans: Sunny was "curled tightly like a pangolin". (1) Binnoy Chacha looked "like a wild man from the woods". (1) Veena aunty had a "praying mantis embrace. On their train journey, Sunny clung like a limpet to his sister. (4). Binoy Chacha "had stormed off to wild places to paint" (5) "A brace of fierce-looking coolies leapt on board like wolves". (7) The gnome-like Aslambhai is close to nature. The trees were "loped and disfigured." Arid landscape, "like people whose arms and legs had been cut off," Shikha thought with a shudder. (8) The landscape is humanized, while people are compared to animals. Langurs sat "just like men at the station." There was a television set "crouching in one dark corner". (12)

Binoy Chacha's House and Environment

Binoy Chacha's house is built on the edge of a cliff and the view is breath-taking. "In the middle distance, another rugged rocky ridge ran across the horizon. Massive crenelated walls that ended in a formidable looking fort "that squatted proudly" at its very spur". (12) The children could see the fort Shergarh Kila, and below it, the palace, Chhota Mahal. "Bush, scrub, scraggy date palms and a series of ravines, tawny, amber and beige" (80) give a foretaste of the tigers that are going to appear. Shiksa listens from her uncle's house to the call of the tiger in the nearby reserve at night: "Aaoom-aaoooom-aaroom-aaargh". (26) She feels that the tigers are talking to each other. Later, she finds the calls comforting and reassuring.

Visiting with Tigers

Initially, when Binoy Chacha suggests taking a pair of binoculars to spot tigers, Shikha is not happy, but scared because the tigers in the zoo appeared "so menacing, as if they were biding their time and plotting about what they would do to the visitors who stared and hooted at them once they got out". (17)

They are escorted in a jeep by Aslambhai, a very experienced honorary wildlife warden. The children see animals enjoying themselves in the forest pool. They spot sambhar deer. They come across a tiger pugmark on the road. "Like us, they too like using the road," explains Asambhai. (22) The animal imagery continues inside the sanctuary. They see a banyan tree with "python like roots". (23) Shikha looked around in alarm, rather like the spotted deer had back in the park". (25)

The Birds

The flora and fauna of the region are enumerated. The list of birds is impressive - the crested serpent eagle, the nightjar, the red-vented bulbul, cocoa brown treepies, scarlet minivets and the partridge which call out "Pateela! Pateela", in shrill tones. Aslambhai stops the vehicle in order to let the children hear the sounds of the jungle waking up. (32) They hear the "cheerful musical call made by the bulbul".

Butterflies with yellow and deep blue with orange markings fly about. The dust of the sanctuary is different from the dust of the roads – it is fine and silvery. Description and behaviour of the jungli soor, the wild boar, sambhar deer, chital and many other animals enrich the narrative with eco-knowledge.

The First Appearance of Shahenshah

The first appearance of Shahenshah, the king of the sanctuary is a masterpiece of description: "An absolutely huge tiger was padding down the path, his great paws puffing up little clouds of pale dust as he walked towards them, beautifully framed by the whispering golden-green grass fronds bending over him from either side". (39) His fiery coat, with its beautiful black flames, shone in the early morning sunlight. His great golden amber eyes stared at them gravely, and just for a second, his eyes looked at them gravely, and just for a second, his ears cocked interrogatively forward, like a gong whose name has been called". He took care to place his rear paws exactly where his front paws had been, as he walked". (39) The tiger goes on to mark his territory and the children get the sharp, hot animal smell. "That beautiful tiger had just walked past them, minding its own business. . . . Why then did people have to get after this poor animal? How could anyone point a gun at such a beautiful creature? If you left it

alone, it left you alone", (42) Shika wonders and says that it was an experience like meeting a prime minister or a king.

A Conversation about Tigers and Safeguard of Tigers

The need for tiger conservation is brought out in the form of a local legend told to the children by Sherifa, the wife of Aslambhai. The Maharaja of Shergarh, in the days of yore, organised a tiger hunt which went on for two years. Hundreds of the great beasts were killed. "So many animals died that the forests started themselves to die of grief. The trees began to wither, the waterholes and lakes were parched because the streams simply flowed out or dried up …." (59) The maharaja's son sickened. A holy man living on the banks of a steam told him that he should find a small tiger cub for the boy to look after and raise. A starving cub that had lost its mother was found and brought to the palace. The royal couple knew that only if the cub lived would the prince live. They then understood the interdependence of all living creatures. The prince recovered to full health and the tiger became his inseparable companion.

The young *rajkumar (prince)* persuaded his father to decree that there would be no more tiger hunts in Shergarh. So, Shergarh really did become "the fort of the tiger," the realm of the tiger.

> And to his amazement, in a few years the maharaja found that his kingdom had begun prospering again as never before. There were no droughts, no famines, and food and water was plentiful. You see, the tigers had started looking after the jungles again and you couldn't have better caretakers of the jungle! The tigers made

> sure that there were just enough deer and antelope for the forests to support, that they didn't eat up all the bushes and plants and so the trees grew tall and strong. And the trees ensured that the rainwater was caught between the wide and deep net of their roots in the soil, leaking it out bit by bit all the year round in springs and streams, that there could never be a drought even if the rains were not good. (62)

Best Policy is Not to Intervene and Disturb

Shikha had kept on hearing screeching and clanging noises in her head ever since the accident. Now, the noises were slowly disappearing. Shikha wonders on hearing the story if her brother would recover if they got him a tiger cub.

The Forest Officer's daughter Dipti assigns Shikha to photograph the tigers during her absence. It is an assignment that Shikha does faithfully. Every day she goes to the sanctuary and takes photographs. She takes down notes and builds up an album, a record note-book which is a real treasure.

Once, Shikha and Dipti see a crocodile waiting for a chital. Shikha wants to warn the deer, but Dipti explains that they should not interfere. However, a heron gives the deer warning just in time. Shikha learns that one should not interfere with nature's food chain. Dipti also senses the healing power of nature. "And deep inside her, Dipti hoped that the tigers of Shergarh would protect the children she was putting into their fierce care". (85) However, she is worried when Shikha calls Shahenshah an "old doofus" in her letter. She warns her that he is a wild tiger, not a pet.

Relationship between Animals and Their Environment

The relationship of the animals and their environment is explained by Aslambhai who tells Shikha:

> There will be many days when you won't see any tigers. But you will see the places where the tigers live, and the other animals that share the tigers' habitat. Without these beautiful places and without them, the tiger can't live and without the tiger, they can't live either. That is why we must keep these places beautiful and not destroy them and that is why you must photograph them as well as the tiger. (101)

Importance of Animal Sanctuaries

The working of the ecosystem with its biodiversity is expressed by Shikha who likes the sanctuary, because "everything seems to know what it has to do. I mean all creatures go on with what they have to do without really getting into each other's way. Sometimes they do, but then they just butt one another politely and get on with things. Not like us, always interfering with one another unnecessarily and getting all upset". (119) Tigers catch the weak animals, ensuring that the fittest survive.

Attitudes of Characters toward Nature and Animals Exemplified

Ranjit Lal introduces several negative characters to bring out undesirable attitudes to nature. Goldie Singh, the non-resident Indian is an example of what a visitor to the sanctuary should not be. He complains of not meeting a tiger. He demands value for money and wants to put in a complaint because he is eager to tell

his friends in the States that he had seen a tiger. Ali, Aslambhai's mischievous son gives him a fright by imitating a tiger's roar.

Veena Aunty is an obnoxious woman who encourages villagers to graze their cattle in the sanctuary. She thinks tigers should be killed. She hates wildlife. She believes sanctuaries exist because the government wants to make money through tourism: "I think all these places should be closed down and the people allowed back in. They will be able to look after the environment much better than any tigers!" (134). "If you want to see tigers, you can go to a zoo" she declares. (174) Veena aunty's cousin Randhir uses satanic logic when he contends that allowing tiger hunting will help conservation because rich people would want the tiger population to increase.

The personalities of the tigers are brought out distinctly in the story. While Shahenshah is majestic, he is rather gentle at heart, and his mate Sheba is proud, beautiful and very powerful, overshadowing her sister, Begum. Shaitan the beta male likes frightening people. He makes mock attacks. Like Shikha, Sheba loves the forest pond, Hira Talo. It has deep green waters and is surrounded by ochre cliff faces, steep ravines with rugged date palms and giant bamboo clumps. Kingfishers and lapwings fly around. Sunny begins to gain confidence little by little. He does not cling to his sister, but is willing to explore the ruined fort.

Shika takes Sunny in a jeep to the sanctuary when Veena aunty tries to separate them. The children feel affinity towards the animals. In the sanctuary, they know how to survive. They get the unique opportunity of playing with wild tiger cubs when they

hide in a cave when the tigress, Sheba is away hunting. Sheba is a mother figure to the children, whom Aslambhai names the "small tigers of Shergarh" (226).

Sunny begins to regain his speech when he plays with the cubs. After the children leave, Sheba returns and sensing human presence, takes the cubs to another spot she had kept in mind for emergencies.

Randhir and his friends who are poachers kill and skin the tigress Begum, who had been missing for quite some time. The poachers are caught using jungle tactics, traps with vines, formulated by the clever Ali. Learning a lesson from the tigers, Shikha uses the peculiarly intense looks that she had learnt from Sheba, thus gaining the power of assertion. Brother and sister emerge from their trauma and integrate with the mainstream life under the benign influence of the felines of Shergarh.

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Dr. Shobha Ramaswamy
Department of English
Kongunadu Arts & Science College
Coimbatore 641029
Tamilnadu, India
shobini_2005@yahoo.co.in