

## Raising Eco-Consciousness in Children through Picture Books: A Comparative Analysis of English and Pakistani Children's Fiction

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### Abstract

*Children at an early age learn things from the multimodal way of learning. Whatever children learn or observe, they keep it with them throughout life. So, raising eco-friendly children through picture books is one of the best ways to create eco-consciousness. This study aims to investigate picture books' efficacy in conveying knowledge about ecosystems. The concept of David Orr's ecological literacy shows how far literature is playing a role in raising environmental awareness. For this purpose, picture books are selected from English and Pakistani children's fiction, i.e., 10 Things I can do to help my world, Penguins do not wear sweaters, Can we save tigers, Kaala Bhoot, and kho kho kho. After evaluating both fictions, it is evident that picture books are used to raise ecological literacy among children. Moreover, it is assessed that English fiction is a step forward from Pakistani fiction in raising awareness as it focuses on environmental concerns of modern-day life while Pakistani fiction is still in its very initial stages.*

**Keywords:** Children's fiction, Eco-consciousness, Ecological literacy, Picture books

### 1. Introduction

With the advent of technology and globalization, environmental issues are increasing day by day. Unfortunately, with more knowledge, humans are becoming more vulnerable to Earth. To achieve their materialistic goals and make their life more comfortable, they destroy all the natural resources, and the leftover pollutes the environment. Wilson (1984) while discussing the destruction of biodiversity, says, "Folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us" (p. 121).

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Ecocriticism is the study of environmental issues and their representation in literature. It deals with the relationship between humans and nature, its preservation, and its portrayal in literature as described by Glotfelty (1996). The slow violence against the environment also makes us aware of a severe environmental crisis. Awareness about the environment is raised through different tools like social media, news, television, or by conducting seminars. The most effective way of raising awareness is to do it from the early childhood stages. Children are the best objects to teach anything and are more curious about learning new things. It is also a need of the hour to produce eco-friendly<sup>3</sup> children so that the next generation avoids harming the environment from the very start.

Children learn fast at a younger age as compared to adults. There are many ways of creating awareness among children, but the best way is through children's literature, i.e., picture books, story books, or magazines. Makwanyana and Dick (2014) believe that children's literature promotes eco-consciousness, knowledge, appreciation, and stewardship of children. Moreover, they also concluded that teaching them at a young age is the best method of inculcating long-lasting eco-consciousness (p.10). Both schooling and parenting play a vital role in producing eco-friendly children who can protect the environment independently, considering it a moral obligation. Children's literature includes picture books, magazines, and story books. Bader (1976) claims that a picture book is a commercial product and a substance of manufacture that combines illustrations, texts, and designs. It is a document that constitutes history, culture, and society and, above all, an exposure for the readers. It is a form of art related to the interdependence of words and pictures, the drama of page turning, and the concurrent demonstration of two pages facing each other. Critics define children literature in their own ways, i.e. Peter Hunt (2003) defines it as an academic discipline and a set of texts. Kimberley Reynolds (2011), is of the view that the term "children's literature" has a largely unproblematic, everyday meaning outside academia. Mostly it refers to the written material published by children's publishers for children and young people. She further adds that term has different meaning for those who research and teach children literature. According to Nel and Paul (2021) children literature is an umbrella term which includes wide range of genres and

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<sup>3</sup>not environmentally harmful

disciplines. In another way, Pery Nodelman (as cited in Hunt, 2003) says that its audience defines it as mainly written by adults but read by children. So, the boundary of the literature written for children is hard to define because children i.e., now read many texts written for adults, Gulliver's Travels written by Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe's masterpiece Robinson's Crusoe, and Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling.

Juvenile literature can be classified into different genres, i.e., picture books, story books, fairy tales, animal stories, and adventure stories. According to age group, it can also be classified as picture books (0-5 years), books for beginners (5 to 7 years), books for older children (8-12 years) and books for adults (13 to 18 years). In the fifteenth century, primarily, children's stories are based on moral lessons or religious teachings. However, with progress in the digital world, writers have also begun writing stories for children for entertainment. As English literature has its golden age, "the golden age of children's literature" is between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

A picture book uses two modes of communication, i.e., words and pictures, to create meaning. The pictures are necessary to understand the message as the picture book is primarily for 0-5 years. Children from this age group learn more by visual interpretation. Picture books introduced messages to young learners in a very creative and authentic way. Mitchell et.al., (2003) stated that with the name of picture books, colorful and brightly illustrated books come to mind. Regardless of age group, most of us got attracted to these books with colorful pictures giving meaningful themes. These definitions give us an idea of how these books can be used to create environmental consciousness. A bond is created between nature and children through these books; in this way, children's literature creates awareness about the surroundings from a very young age.

According to cognitive psychology, the starting years of a child's life are crucial as it affects the building of positive or negative behaviors throughout their lives. Children are inquisitive and more sensitive about their surroundings and ongoing changes. There is a strong bond between nature and children. Rousseau argues in *Emile* (1762) that nature should be in accordance with children's growth, and also it commits all for the best. The poet of nature, Wordsworth, in his famous poem *The Prelude* (1850) celebrates his childhood as a free encounter with nature. Children at a very

young age have no connection and affection with nature, so elders have to give awareness to children about their environment. A pamphlet titled “Why Can I Teach my young children about the Environment?” was distributed by the 'US Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1997). In this, it is argued that environmental education should begin at very early stages in life. The author is staunch that such things play a vital role in building long-lasting behaviors and attitudes toward the natural atmosphere. It is also an assumption that children who do not get exposure to nature in their childhood do not respect nature. In contrast, those exposed to nature at an early age live a healthy life and learn a lot from the environment

If children from their childhood are given awareness about the environment and its hazards, it will reduce environmental problems. According to Gonen and Guler (2011) the attitudes developed about nature at a young age are essential. He also suggested some topics to create eco-consciousness in adults and children, i.e., land, air, natural resources, minerals, water, plants, animals, etc. Picture books dealing with the environment are of two types; one introduces the environment, i.e., oceans, rivers, seas, glaciers, mountains, landscapes, and ecology, while the other talks about the devastation caused to the environment by humans, i.e., deforestation, ozone depletion, melting of glaciers, etc.

It is also observed that most children's environmental books are primarily published in developed countries like Australia, the USA, Canada, France, Germany, and Italy. There are several publications related to awareness and issues of the environment for children of age group 3-12 years. It is part of tradition worldwide that adults entertain children through stories, fairy tales, folk tales, and fables. However, these were part of the oral literature. Before 16th century, there were no specific books for children. The only published books were for adults and children to encounter them directly. Before this, they were trained at home just by telling stories verbally. With advancement, the focus shifted from oral to written literature.

No prior attention was given to such topics in our country, but few authors and illustrators have started this project. It is in its early stages and needs more time to flourish. Modern children's literature portrays nature as a

complex and ever-changing entity. It also evokes such feelings among children to save nature from anthropocentric activities.

## **2. Literature Review**

Rueckert first used Eco criticism in 1996 in his "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." However, unfortunately, ecocriticism did not gain any popularity at that time. Later, it was used by Glotfelty in "The Ecocriticism Reader" in 1996, and he defined it as, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of the texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies."

In 1992, Western Literature Association (WLA) formed ASLE, i.e., the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, to study the relationship between literature and nature. Later 1993, Patrick Murphy composed a journal named Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) with the same aim. Among all the essential features, one of the remarkable traits of ecocriticism is to create awareness from childhood. Lankford (2010) believes a natural bond exists between a child and nature. He suggests that nature is definite and accurate and reflects a child's pure and simple character.

Mostly environmental crises are due to human activities, which are causing more danger to humans than the atmosphere. The point is that Earth will balance itself; in the end, man is at stake. David Sobel (1996) argues that we must move beyond the fear of environmental crisis or "ecophobia," we can do so by educating our children about their local environment and building a feeling of love and care.

### **2.1 Picture Book Literature**

Orbis Pictus (1658) is considered to be the first picture book for children by John Amos Comenius (as cited in Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 1993). It was the first book embedded with pictures and written for children. Due to its acceptability in society, it was later published again in several European languages. Kennedy (2017) believes that illustration is much more important than words in picture books. According to Gonen (1989), books

for children aged 1 to 7 have more pictures than text and are known as "picture story books." Virginia Lee Burton published "The little house" (1942), the first children's book dealing with the destructive environment in the USA in the 1940s (Gonen and Guler, 2011).

Illustration in picture books is essential as it is the way of transferring the message to the reader. Pictures should be illustrated in such a way that it enhances and stimulates the attention of the reader. Overall, it should accurately provide the gist of all information through minute and detailed characterization. Through these books, children will be able to understand the meaning of the story. Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson (1998) argue that visual clues enable beginners and nonreaders to enjoy picture books alone. Picture books are also a source of aesthetics. Jacobs and Tunnel (as cited in Ramasawmy, 2019) believe that the beauty of art and its power can be traced perfectly by picture books, which is why they are an effective tool for children to make them aware of their surroundings. Children very young cannot read, but they can understand. What they see in their babbling stage becomes part of their long-term memory. In this way, consciously or unconsciously, they are getting aware of their surroundings.

Eco literacy or ecological literacy is a term that David Orr (1992) used in his work *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*, and it means the ability to understand the natural environment and systems that make life possible on this planet. He also argues that texts directly or indirectly talk about the environment, i.e., biotic and abiotic organisms, their relationship, and natural resources. Wooltorton (2006) also defines ecological literacy as the general understanding of ecology and, after this, able to embody it in daily life. Ecological literacy provides an ecocritical vision between text and nature, raises Eco consciousness, and teaches about the environment.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

"Ecological literacy" was mainly associated with David Orr in 1989. He is of the view that human lives are greatly affected by environmental education. While emphasizing the importance of literacy related to ecology, he exclaims that the disorder of mind is reflected through that of the ecosystem, which is why an awareness arises from an ecological crisis (p. 9). He focuses on the role of education in raising awareness about the

environment and follows that our education should focus on the environmental concerns of nature. Orr defines it as "all education is environmental education" (p. 90). It refers to his concept of what a student possesses in his surroundings, i.e., curriculum and physical surroundings, both exposed and hidden, and estimates his involvement of self in nature or not. Orr also argues that the environmental crisis is because of the non-serious attitudes of human beings towards ecological patterns, the deuteriation of the ecosystem men is causing, and its long-lasting effects. It also refers to the conscious awareness of the environment and other organisms around them. In this way, eco-literacy became a focal point for educating children about their environment.

In *Ecological Literacy: Educating our Children for a Sustainable Future* (Stone & Barlow, 2006), ecological literacy is further enhanced by Orr and several other writers and grounded in feasible acts. These exposures and experiences support sustainability as not a sole entity of the past or a cheering hope for the future but a vigorous reality in this sphere and now available in nature's integrity.

This paper will examine how awareness is created among young children through ecological literacy, and it will be examined from David Orr's perspective. In his book *Earth and Mind*, Orr argues that the disjointed connection of human nature relationship is due to overemphasizing economic success and a disjointed education system with overbooking routines.

#### **4. Analysis**

This study aims to apply ecocriticism in children's literature to how literature helps bring children close to nature and raise eco-consciousness. This study compares English children's fiction and Pakistani children's fiction. For this purpose, picture books from both pieces of literature are compared. This study uses descriptive research methodology to evaluate the environmental elements in children's picture books of Pakistani and English children's fiction.

##### **4.1 English Children Fiction**

Children's literature in Britain started flourishing in the late 18th century. Before this, books published for children were primarily institutional

(school books) or religious books for academic or moral development. In the late 18th century, 50 books were published yearly, and they were mostly very moralizing with a sense to please readers by using different eye-catching colors and pictures (“British library”). The most celebrated pioneer of children's literature is John Newbery. He incarnated the idea of John Locke, that is, teaching via amusement.

In English literature, there is a focus on the cognitive and behavioral development of children from a very young age. For this purpose, they published many books according to age group. Moreover, they described environmental concerns to their future generation, such as protecting endangered species, carbon footprints, ozone depletion, protecting water life, and natural resources.

*Baby Loves Science series*, in their addition, presents the concept of global warming to babies. The picture book titled “Baby Loves Green Energy” written by Ruth Spiro (2018) and illustrations by Irene Chan, has the theme of global warming and green energy. The storyline is such a way that it starts with making the concept of "baby has a blanket; when baby puts the blanket on, she feels warm" Then it is stated that just like the baby, Earth does contain a blanket, and this blanket is termed as the 'air.' The writer compares the baby and Earth so that if the baby feels hot, Earth will also feel hot, when covered. Then it is explained that air is made up of different gases. Some of them are helpful, but excessive gases cause harm to the Earth, like a blanket holding warmth, as a result of raising the Earth's temperature. Then it is illustrated that humans are the primary cause of rising warmth under the Earth's blanket. "but people are adding more greenhouse gases to the air. Car and trucks burn fuel that makes extra carbon dioxide. Power plants and factories do, too". After creating awareness, its remedy is discussed by the character of the baby, who also wants to put her part in maintaining the Earth's temperature so she can walk instead of ride, turn off lights, and recycle.

*Penguins do not Wear Sweaters!* by Marikka Tamura is illustrated by Daniel Rieley (2018) for children 2-5 years old. This book creates awareness about the lives of living beings living in waters in oceans and rivers, but their habitat also needs to be more secure due to human activities, as this story talks about the aftermath of an oil spill near a penguin's habitat.



Penguins live happily in the sea and love playing in the water. But suddenly, there is an oil spill, and penguins get worried about it as narrated, "But WHAT is this? Something is floating in the water. Dark. Gooney, oily."

Further, it is explained how the natural living of penguins gets filthy, and due to this, their feathers become sticky. Even the food chain is destroyed. Penguins do not eat fish due to dirty water as some are dead, or they cannot enter dirty water. "Slick penguins cannot live in this. It coats bodies with goo, making sleek's feathers sticky and wet. Its smells and tastes funny, not nice like fish, not good like salt and sun."

However, a well-meaning human-knit sweater for penguins to protect them from oil but in reality, it restricts them from flying or moving. The author is conveying the message that sweaters are of no use to penguins. The best way to help or save penguins is to avoid such activities. The penguins were happy to find their space clean and clear when the oil spills finished. "And when the coast is clear, penguins return. They drive down deep again. Happy to be penguins doing penguin things."

*10 Things I Can Do to Help My World* by Melanie Walsh (2008) is the best book to create eco-consciousness among children. The book comprises of beautiful die-cut pages with small messages about saving nature and energy through small acts. This book offers a lot of ways to conserve natural resources by protecting environment and living sustainably. Different small acts like switching off light, turning off the tap while brushing, planting trees, and recycling of garbage are narrated in book.

*Michael Recycle* is a picture book by Ellie Bethel illustrated by Alexander Colombo (2009). It is about the adventure of a superhero who visits different parts of the Earth to help people to clean their surroundings. In Michael's recycle series, the filthiness of inhabitants is described as follows, "There was a town, called Abbordoo-Rimey, where garbage was left, to grow rotten and slimy, it never smelled fresh, the air was all hazy, but the people did nothing they got rather lazy." However, when green caped crusader comes to save the Earth, they recycle all their garbage and junk like used pots, pans, and cans. After this, the town was transformed into all green, and everyone was happy as they felt inner satisfaction. After this, when Micheal revisited the town, he was not disappointed: "Everything

looked so clean and brand new, the sky and the river were again a bright blue." So, this picture book discusses the concept of saving energy consumption and teaches young children that cleanliness is an obligation. Everyone must keep the Earth clean and be a savior. Less energy consumption and less garbage are hands-to-hand processes as we are not just saving the Earth, but indirectly we are saving ourselves because it is good for our health to breathe in a pure atmosphere.

Similarly, *Recycle and Remark* by DK (2020) revolve around the same concept. It is full of different activities to keep budding environmentalists busy in taking steps to save the planet from the very start. In the story, children learn how to reuse things, i.e., using T-shirts in tote bags and plastic bottles to grow a plant.

Rebecca and James McDonald (2016) tell young readers about the Earth, its temperature, planets, and living organisms in *I am Earth*. This author is triggering children's emotions as the Earth is personified, i.e., given the quality of speaking, children can feel the real pain and request of the Earth. As, "I am unique, just like you, You have to help me by keeping me healthy and clean. Because if I get sick, the air and water get sick, which is not good for anyone." The message is given to the readers that if we do wrong to Earth, it harms ourselves. It reflects the impact of humans on the planet. It creates awareness about the ecosystem and how to improve the environment.

Nowadays, environmentalists are showing concern about endangered or extinct species that humans kill such species for pleasure, and their number is decreasing. Therefore, one should take steps to save such species. This issue is also incarnated in children's minds. For example, a picture book by *Can We Save The Tiger?* Written by Martin Jenkins and illustrated by Vicky White (2010) has the same storyline and focuses on the reasons why species are becoming endangered? It also shows that how human behavior is causing impact on the survival of endangered species.

#### **4.2 Pakistani Children Literature**

Pakistan has a great oral tradition in the world regarding folklore and fables. In our country, primarily, the development of children's literature is in Urdu. Almost 40 million of the population of Pakistan is from 8 to 18 years.

However, unfortunately, only 2% of the population among these are the “reading class.” According to the survey (Pakistan Economy survey), the adult literacy rate is only 38%, and children's books are not brought to them by their parents. Low literacy rates and less attention to purchasing children's books are the main hindrances to enhancing the literature written for children in Pakistan. The concept of picture books in Pakistan is comparatively new. As in past years, children's books were bound to academic books. However, in recent periods, with increased awareness and exposure to education, oral literature has been replaced by printed books. Few story and picture books are published, but primarily young readers are addicted to reading books by foreign authors.

In past years, only a few authors have written story books for children, but more focus has yet to be given. In the late 20th century, some authors started to publish picture books based purely on environmental concerns. Rumana Husain is a leading figure in creating conscious awareness about the planet among the Pakistani generation through books. She has also introduced bilingual series (English and Urdu) stories. She is an author from Karachi and writes about air pollution, the effects of plastic bags, and the destruction of the food web. Rumana says, I always like to write about nature and its bounties, the Earth, animals, trees, environment, and exploitation of nature caused by man and also about friendship and harmony between humans and nature (Ebrahim, 2020).

Baela Raza Jamil, the founder of the Children's literature festival, Lahore, told “The third pole” about Rumana Husain that her books are different from the academic's books that our young children are forced to read in institutions. We strive to promote reading as a leisure activity, and Rumana is doing this effectively through her stories and illustrations.

In her story "*Kala Bhoot*" (2019), she discussed the effects of plastic bags and how they affect plants, water life, and humans. She called plastic bags "Kala bhoot" (The black monster). That shop vendor gives fruits in a plastic bag that flies away with air and harmed newly growing flowers, and then this monster reaches the river, and the fish is entangled in it and dies. After seeing this destruction, young children dragged all monsters from the river and decided to keep these plastic bags away. So, the writer is creating

awareness about plastic and is guiding youngsters to remove plastic from their lives and move towards green life.

Another story by Rumana Husain is *Khoo Khoo Khoo – Khansta Shehar (The Coughing City)*, which is illustrated by Adeel Zafar (2020). In the story *Khoo Khoo Khoo*, she introduced a city in which everyone was living happily, cock used to crook in the morning, birds chirp, and the cat meowed. All families live happily, but over time people start moving toward this city due to this population increase and automobiles and industries increase. All these things combine and cause drastic impacts on the environment. Due to pollution, everyone was having problems in breathing and was coughing. Even animals and birds were also coughing. Due to this severe condition of the town, birds and animals started leaving the city. This author deals with overpopulation, air pollution, industrialization, infrastructure, and large-scale people moving from villages to cities.

*Amai and the Banyan Tree* is written by Fauzia Aziz Minallah (2012). In this, Banyan Tree cried and told Seema and Ali that people had destroyed their friends and were now suffering from the flood. Due to flooding, many families lost their houses. So, Ma Bunyan orders Amai, a bird of light, to turn into a shooting star and take both of them on a tour of flooding sites. Seema and Ali were shocked to see the destruction caused by chemicals and burning fuel. In the end, Banyan requested to take care of the trees. So, when children started planting trees, Ma Bunyan became delighted as everyone knows that plants are natural air purifiers and keep the environment clean and healthy. That's why one should grow more and more plants to maintain the temperature of the Earth.

## 5. Conclusion

By comparing English and Pakistani literature, it is revealed that the West is a way to step forward from our country. In Pakistani children's books, environmental issues are discussed, but themes are in the initial stage, i.e., the use of plastic bags, the effect of toxic gases on the environment, etc. However, a close textual reading of English literature shows that Eco consciousness is incarnated among children at a very young age, and issues they are debating on are of the modern age, i.e., energy consumption, recycling, and endangered species. So, Pakistani authors should take steps to create more and more awareness through the power of the pen and use

factual information in their writings as children rely on the information provided.

Therefore, the best way is to use picture books and children's literature to raise environmental consciousness and eco-friendly children. Picture books use different themes, illustrations, and attractive colors to convey the message to young children, as cognitive psychologists believe that attitudes and behaviors learned at a young age affect their whole life. Therefore, raising Eco-conscious behavior among future generations is the most valuable service to the environment.

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