



Forest during Formative Years of Human Life: A Reading of *Amidst the Pines* by Singhal

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Abstract

'Amidst the Pines' by Kabita Singhal is a memoir that describes her childhood days at a boarding school in Darjeeling namely Kurseong. The school was surrounded by tall pine trees and was situated in the middle of a forest. The author illustrates many literal roles that the forest played during the formative years of her life as a human being. This study deals with some such examples, from the book, that even have a lot of metaphorical implications. More specifically, this paper examines the nature-human relationship that has been depicted by the author, in light of ecocritical consciousness derived through the ideas from the scholars like Greg Garrard, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Patrik D. Murphy and concludes that forest plays a vital role in inculcating the sense of awe, joy, fear, courage, transformation, and rootedness in human beings.

Keywords

Forest, Ecocriticism, Formative Years, Fear, Courage, Transformation.

Introduction

Amidst the Pines (2021) by Kabita Singhal is a memoir that describes her childhood days at a boarding school in Darjeeling, specifically in Kurseong. The school where she along with her siblings was admitted at the age of five, was surrounded by the tall pine trees and was situated in the middle of the forest (Singhal 22). The author illustrates many roles that the forest played such as incubating the sense of various human emotions, namely— awe, fear, adventure, courage and freedom during

her stay there from her childhood to adulthood. The examples of forest-human relationships which Singhal has incorporated in the memoir don't have only literal but also metaphorical implications. While celebrating the bountifulness of forest and implicating the importance of forest in human life, the memoir makes a connection to ecocriticism. This study detects, discusses, and makes an analysis of some events and illustrates how the above-mentioned emotions along with some others like the sense of rootedness, as well as the importance of forbearance was inculcated in the children through the forest. Overall, the paper examines how and what about the nature-human relationship in the formative years of her life is depicted by the author in her memoir. Therefore, with a brief overview of forest in literature, it will be interpreted in light of ecocritical consciousness derived from the ideas of the scholars like Greg Garrard, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Patrik D. Murphy.

Literature Review: Literature, Forest, Nature Writing, and Ecocriticism

The man-nature relationship has got ample space in literature of all times. In 1965 Northrop Frye proposed in *A Natural Perspective* the existence of a distinct space he called the “green world” in Shakespeare’s “forest comedies.” This green world—a space of escape, freedom, and renewal opposed to the court or city—depicted the forest in them. As Elizabeth Weixel observes, “Frye’s green world formulation has in many ways directed literary criticism’s approach to forest spaces, and his legacy endures” (2). However the representation of forest underwent an alteration along with the writers in chronology. Robert Pogue Harrison, building on Frye’s foundation, proposed to explain the antagonism between Western Civilization and wild nature as embodied in forest by tracing a “genetic psychology of the earliest myths and fables” of forest (3).

Forest in Shakespeare’s works is “mixed” and “wild” which captures the often contradictory and ambiguous nature of forests (Weixel 3). Similarly, she finds David Young’s “The Heart’s Forest: A Study of Shakespeare’s Pastoral Plays” appropriating woodland into the larger category of pastoral, thereby erasing its distinct character as a historical and literary space (Weixel 3). The literature of the 16th and 17th centuries inherited from that of the preceding centuries the forest of exile, wanderings, licentiousness, and chivalry found in Malory, Chaucer, and continental romance (Weixel 3). In Weixel’s

words, “the green world continues to flourish, but another prominent approach to the forest in literature—one more concerned with the material of timber than with shady metaphysical coverts—is emerging in the developing field of ecocriticism” (3). Karen Raber’s 2007 bibliographical essay in *English Literary Renaissance* on ecocritical study of Renaissance literature examined “the relationship between literary and cultural artifacts and the natural environment” (Raber 151; Weixel 3). Hence the area along with scope gradually embraced an expansion and eventually it seeped in to the field of literature.

Peter Barry claims the ecocritical approach took “its literary bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers whose works celebrate[d] nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau” (249).

However, Weixel opines that the potential of ecocriticism to reexamine accepted understandings of literature’s engagement with the material natural world has much to offer fields outside its traditional purview of British Romantic and American Transcendental literature (4). For example, Weixel cites Gabriel Egan’s *Green Shakespeare* as the most prominent ecocritical study of early modern literature to date (4).

Weixel’s study explains the role forest played in the social hierarchy and the uses writers made of the forest. Being informed of all these preceding developments and excavated facts about forests in literature, my focus is on the role forest can play during the formative years of human life.

Jeyashree G. Iyer holds that the concept of the forest is not only pertained to trees and plants but also to other species like birds, animals and reptiles. Forests are the metonymy of an unadulterated environment complementing contradictory elements of freedom and restrictions. The forest is not just a place of trees and plants...it is considered to be a place of serenity, peace and purity on the one hand but on the other hand, it is the place that endangers human life, not a congenial place for humans to live (14).

A spur of going back to forest and or nature has been forced by the pandemic during and in this post-pandemic era. One or two components of nature un/intentionally are embedded in almost all literary texts as one of its basic elements, is the setting. Thus, the presence of nature, of which the most frequently mentioned part is a forest, is treated as the most crucial factor in human life. Forest as the most prominent part of nature by its implication calls for the concern of the environment that eventually pulls the undeniable strings of eco-criticism.

Eco-criticism as a term was first coined by William Rueckert in his critical writing “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978. The word ‘eco’ comes from the Greek root word ‘oikes’ which etymologically means household or earth and “logy” from “logos” means logical discourse. Together they mean criticism of the house-the environment as represented in literature. According to Rueckert, ecocriticism applies ecology or ecological principles to the study of literature (qtd. in Mishra 168).

Similarly, Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as “a study of relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environment’s praxis” (430). Further ecocriticism does not simply mean nature study; it has distinguished itself from conventional nature writing first by its ethical stand and commitment to the natural world and then by making the connection between the human and the non-human world.

Patrik D. Murphy holds that Ecocriticism is literary criticism that arises from and is oriented towards a concern with human and non-human interaction and interpretation. Murphy believes that it is a dialogue i.e., the exchange of “energy/information” not only conversation, “Ecological dialogue is the process by which humans can talk through how to live with the rest of their bioregion” (316). *Amidst the Pines* also deals with such interaction between humans and non-humans i.e. the forest, bushes and trees which this paper interprets as the role of the forest that has an effect on human habits and values during the formative years of her life as un/consciously implied by the author.

Statement of the problem

Singhal’s *Amidst the Pines* celebrates the bountifulness of nature. In addition, it also presents the various roles forest plays during the formative years of human life.

However, since this is comparatively a new text, it is not amply explored. If even it is, it is read mostly as a memoir with a focus on the sequence of events in the author's life at the given time and space but not from an ecocritical perspective.

Objectives

Since *Amidst the Pines* has not yet been studied from the perspective of nature writing as a part and ecocriticism as a whole, its objectives are to bring out what ideas about ecocriticism or nature writing prevail it, and what forest implies and what it imparts during the central character/s' development as human beings within the spatial-temporal frame of their living amidst the forest.

Methodology

The inquiry will be a qualitative one. This paper falls under the secondary research paradigm since printed and online materials produced by the primary authors will be used. It uses cloze reading, description, interpretation, and analysis as its tools for inquiry. Regarding, conceptual framework, it borrows ideas from the scholars like Greg Garrard, Cheryll Glotfelty and Patrik D. Murphy. Garrard holds that the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of human and non-human, throughout cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself (5). Its subjects include the joys of abundant nature, sorrows of its deprivation, hopes for a harmonious existence between humans and nature and fears of loss and disasters (5). Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment ... ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xvii). Likewise, Murphy believes that it is an ecological dialogue i.e., the exchange of "energy" (316).

Discussion and Analysis: Forest, Awe, Fear, Courage, and Transformation

Amidst the Pines (ATP henceforward), alone its title puts an emphasis on its "forestness" (coinage mine!?) as its setting. Dow Hill stands like an imposing fortress amidst an alpine forest "tucked away amidst the tall and mighty cryptomeria". It is located at an ideal height of 6000 feet, on the hill facing the Himalayan range (Singhal 15). Dow Hill School is an exclusive boarding school for girls. It is about 5 kilometers from the town of Kurseong in Darjeeling district, West Bengal.

Dow Hill, along with its brother School Victoria, is among the older schools in the country. These two heritage schools are situated one kilometer apart in an awe-inspiring pine forest in Kurseong (18). In this way the memoir opens up, dealing with “cultural artifacts and the natural environment” as Raber observed about ecocriticism during English Renaissance literature (151). The author acknowledges the magnificence of the architecture founded by the British Raj in India. “A flight of steps from the study hall took us up to the senior school dormitory building. This was an impressive three-storey structure. Its striking yellow stood out against the backdrop of the verdant green dense forest” (67). Then, she further relates the cultural artifact of the building and the surroundings to the natural glory of the forest :

As one drove up the steep winding slope, at first the cryptomeria trees appeared. The cool hill air filled with the fragrance of wildflowers permeated our senses . . . It almost seemed like one was being prepared to witness this beautiful splendor in the midst of the dense forest. The first glimpse of the majestic buildings surrounded by the mighty trees gave one the impression of it being a fortress in heaven. . . . what a splendid sight! One’s first reaction was that of awe. This was a wonderland! (66)

The wilderness was splendid; further, it is blended with the magnificence of the masonry of the buildings. It provided the place with the impression of a wonderland. Moreover, its (*ATP*’s) subjects include the “joys of abundant nature” (Garrard 5) expressed through sight, sound, and feel :

Far from the maddening crowd in the most pristine surroundings, we were nurtured. Nature’s sounds were the only sounds that reached us. It was sheer bliss listening to the chirping of the birds, the sounds of numerous insects, murmuring brooks, gushing waterfalls and the wind whistling through the trees. Surreal sunrise and sunsets filled our days. (15)

The “nurturing” nature with awe-inspiring scenic beauty of the Sun rising and setting along with babbling brooks and chirping birds are painted in the most vivid language. They “breathed fresh air and the sweet fragrance of exotic orchids innumerable wild flowers and scented pines filled their senses” (Sinhala 16). “Kurseong was on the hill just in front and all around were the other hills with tea estates and their factories visible in the distance” (45). She presents Kurseong in juxtaposition to the man-made tea estate

and its material setting as Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment . . . ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (xvii). Be it the man-made setting or nature it’s all about the earth the author’s focus is on. Singhal depicts the accommodating, homing, caring forest in the following lines:

The virgin forest all around was home to wild animals. At night we could hear the howling jackals and hyenas. The workers on the estates often spotted leopards and their cubs amongst the tea bushes in broad daylight . . . All these stories were really “fascinating.” Leopards sprawling on bungalow lawns. We sometimes spotted leopards majestically crossing the road right in front of our jeep. We were simply awestruck! Rabbits running in front of Jeep headlights always had us excited. (48)

The unadulterated forest homed wild animals; the residents around could hear, see and feel the animals in the narratives of the locals. They talked about how proximate the animals lived with them. It illustrates Iyer’s opinion that the concept of the forest is not only pertained to trees and plants but also to other species like birds, animals, and reptiles (14). Notably, the stories did not frighten them but aroused a “fantastic” feeling of awe and excitement in the children.

After the natural literal material surrounding, the author delves deeper into the abstract and metaphorical as she writes, “The teachers taught us to stand tall like the mighty trees and the lofty mountains with their majestic peaks. The indomitable spirit of the hills seeped into our beings. It was in Dow Hill that we learn to belong. We realized the value of growing strong roots. These would give us strength and keep us firmly grounded” (17).

Their “transition” from junior school to senior school was very smooth. The forest/school became a fun-filled place. It was not only a physical material transition but also a psychological one. They start establishing human networks as well as grow more daring for adventures, “At the end of the teachers’ cottage was the chapel. After this one reached two mossy paths with trees and thick ferns on both sides, one going into the forest that was a shortcut for many of the locals. It looked most inviting to the

adventurous!":

Lush greenery surrounded the grotto, making it the perfect place for picnics. This was where we went for our Easter picnic on Easter Saturdays. A picnic here meant walking down through the forest by the shortcut....The forest was filled with insect sounds and the twitter of birds. And fortunately, in spring, the undergrowth was sparse, and there were no leeches to contend with. So, it was a merry walk through the forest. (77)

Though they find merriment in the walk through the forest, they discover their craving for change and adventure being followed by a sense of fear. In the narrative entitled "Ghost Stories", she says that the setting was ideal for the imagination to run wild as those (boarding) schools were usually "in the midst of dense forest, secluded from any means of civilization" (105). Besides, their bearers, ayahs and other staff who went home late at night also had several tales to tell about ghosts and vampires. They were stories of headless ghosts wandering about aimlessly in the forest. However, confirming fearlessness, she writes, "but during our entire schooling not a single ghost did we encounter" (105); the stories were many but none of us ever encountered any spooky being. They learnt to validate the imaginary with the real and inculcated the sense of joy to enjoy both the natural and the supernatural instead, "We were intrigued when we got the news that Maili delivered a baby girl right in the middle of the forest. ...we certainly lived in the midst of the natural and supernatural" (112).

The chapter "Adventure in the Forest" explicates that the forest incubated in them the sense of adventure, danger, fear, and challenge and also taught them the ways and courage to overcome them. They would bunk and go through the forest to Goethals and return in time for dinner:

One by one we made a dash towards the forest. Danger was lurking at every corner. The first step was to go past the teachers' cottages...onto the shortcut through the forest.... It was all clear, not a soul around: man, animal or beast. So, merrily we went deeper into the forest; happy to be out of the prison walls and breathing in the forest air. (188)

Their transition from childhood to adulthood goes past danger, trepidation, and fret beyond that "the soothing forest sounds come alive filling them with a sense of calm" (189).

The forest is also qualified as “frightening”, “dark” and “eerie” but only in the darkness. In the dark, even the trees “took on monstrous forms.” It started getting eerier by the minute (189). Each little sound was getting magnified and all they could think of were evil spirits and ghosts. Emphasizing the new spirit of fearlessness she states, “Dangerous to say the least but we were bold and daring and loved to experience danger! These lines from the memoir resonate with Iyer’s observation that “children’s literature on forests offers dangerous beauty and the children’s attention is always propelled towards beauty where danger lurks behind” (15).

She accentuates, “Surprisingly no one ever fell off. Finally, we were back in school, happy and refreshed after breathing the intoxicating air of freedom” (116). With the added sense of freedom, the feel of transformation permeates into their being which the author symbolically illustrates through the episode of the butterfly:

Mrs. Siddons her domestic science and health science teacher was a great lover of animals and flowers. The hedge by her quarters comprised hydrangea bushes with their delightful blue and purple flowers growing in bunches. The leaves were referred to as caterpillar leaves on which they can see crawlies metamorphose into beautiful butterflies. (152)

Forest or plants introduced the fact of metamorphosis to them which they learn by observing the caterpillar change into a butterfly in Mrs. Siddons’ Garden.

Singhal confesses that when they go home, they would have a feeling of parting even with the forest the alma matter that transformed them, “So finally, it was goodbye: goodbye forest goodbye peach tree, goodbye hills and goodbye school. Wait for us, we will return in spring: when the trees are dressed in their new leaves when the skies are blue and hills are awakening from their deep slumber” (212). That was a goodbye to Dow Hill surrounded by forest as a “cosy nest”; that was a goodbye to their own childhood. They feel “being plucked and taken away from these virgin surroundings” however, they have a well-grown self in them.

ATP and its Ecocritical Implications

Even if deprived of formal access like in Dow Hill School humans as a product of nature tends to sneak into the wilderness for the innate affinity, they feel with it. Not only this, they experience budding human emotions such as challenge, fear, adventure, courage, peace, security, solace and transformation via or in the lap of nature. Provided this, the modern education system should conceive of a nature-orienting, nature-accessible, nature-respecting as well as nature-conscious and protecting educational environments as in/formal educating setups similar to the suggestion of “green academia” (1) by Sayan Dey in his *The Green Academia* (2023) as a systemic long-term counter-intervention strategy against any form of impending pandemics in the post-COVID era and beyond.

Conclusion

Thus, the memoir presents its plot and narratives, inscribed by the author from the perspective of the then child perceiver, that emanated from the middle of the forest and developed simultaneously with the span of time. Literally, these narratives are inclusive of Dow Hill and its surrounding, the architecture, forest, feelings of joy and awe, budding sense of adventure, challenges, fears, courage to overcome them and eventually the transformation from child to a gratitude-laden eco-conscious human being. Metaphorically, they reflect the life lessons the forest taught them. They learnt to stand tall like the mighty trees and the lofty mountains with their majestic peaks, to keep their spirits indomitable like that of the hills, they learnt to belong and realized the value of growing strong roots that would give them strength and keep them firmly grounded.

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