



The Role of Literature in Shaping Environmental Consciousness: A Study of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*

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Abstract

Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring* shaped environmental consciousness and started a new movement to save nature. Carson played a significant role in bringing forth the dangerous effects of fertilisers and pesticides on the environment. The movement by Carson highlighted and informed the public about how these pesticides harm the living organisms. Although she faced several challenges and threats from the chemical industries and faced the controversies, yet she kept fighting the preservation until the excessive use of fertilisers was banned. It is through her book *Silent Spring* that Carson accomplished it all. In the genre, the book combines field study and literary writing. The present paper explores the role of literature in raising people's awareness about the environment; the issue that is of utmost importance today. From being an environmentalist to a storyteller, Carson's writing style influenced people to work for the preservation of environment and still doing the same. The paper discusses how the book which was penned down in the twentieth century inspires readers in the present times as well.

Keywords: Literature, Environment, Pollution, Future.

Introduction

Literature plays a very important role in making people aware about the environmental degradation. It raises environmental consciousness and fosters empathy in the readers towards the natural world. Literature weaves narratives around what has happened globally. It engages the readers intellectually and emotionally with the complex issues of environment challenges. It has a power to humanise the environmental issues by presenting how it affect the individuals and the communities. Literature can critique the practices and attitudes that can harm nature. It provides the readers with perspectives that help them in getting insights for a sustainable future. The lasting impact of literature on the societies can be observed in the works like Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962).

Rachel Carson, an acclaimed environmentalist and biologist was born on 27 May 1907 in Springdale, Pennsylvania, U.S., and died on 14 April 1964 in Maryland, U.S. While praising Carson, Griswold (2012) called her the "first environmentalist of the modern era" (par. 35). Carson started her writing career as a biologist, but she dedicated the latter part of her life to nature writing. She views that science is an inseparable part of nature. It is with the help of scientific approach that humans can understand the natural phenomena. Carson has

received the international acclaim for her books: *Under the Sea Wind* (1941), *The Sea Around Us* (1951), *The Edge of the Sea* (1955) and *Silent Spring* (1962). These books are regarded landmarks in creating the environmental consciousness.

When the World War II broke out in the 1950s, several new technologies were developed in order to help the military. Later, these technologies were put into use to improve people's life style. Instead of contributing to make the lives of people better, these technologies worsened the circumstances even more. The chemicals that were invented to save several crops from the attacks of insects started to harm humans. It was because of these effects of fertilisers that Rachel Carson began her journey of research on the natural world. She found a great amount of fertilisers and pesticides on plants, weeds and birds. *Silent Spring* by Carson (1962) resulted from the critical findings that she came across during the research conducted by her to know the reason of deaths that had occurred in America.

Carson's importance in contributing to the preservation of environment cannot be undermined. Lear (2002) stated that Carson's *Silent Spring* offers a 'national debate' on the use of fertilisers. The book highlights the issue of how pesticides put impact on the life of creatures. Carson (1962) wrote that no "civilization can wage relentless war" without destroying itself (p. 59). She collected information about how sprays used on food put an impact on the ecology. Extensive research including interviews and reports obtained from different disciplines helped Carson in sowing the seeds of awareness in public. The major finding that Carson discovered was that the chemicals killed birds which fed on the dying insects; that had already taken chemicals from different kinds of food. The whole food chain gets affected by these chemicals. The movement that Carson started was not a call for an immediate ban on these pesticides but made people aware about their less use. Carson writes that civilization progresses with "great speed, but at its end lies disaster" (p. 144). The quote reveals a kind of emphatic warning to people that if they continue to progress the way they are doing without thinking about its impact, the day is not far when the humankind would end itself.

The fertilisers still the songs of birds and insects. Carson mentions the all pervasiveness of these fertilisers which are found in the farms, gardens and forests. While criticising Carson, Darby (2012) writes that she did not accept the views of "knowledgeable scientists" and viewed that her "book should be ignored" (p. 3). Whereas, some critics had the words of praise for her scientific attitude and the approach she adopted to craft these experiences into a literary work. Her emphatic appeal led readers to sympathise with her and follow her message of conservation. Carson adopted a hybrid approach including both the emotional and the factual arguments. All the facets of life are interrelated and purpose of literature becomes successful if it represents all these facets. Lear (1993) states that *Silent Spring* is a reflection on the role of "humanity in nature" (p. 27). It is through the book that Carson started a movement at the ground level which became famous at the international level.

The title of *Silent Spring* is quite appropriate. It evokes the feeling of sadness and demands action because spring as a season is full of life and it suddenly grows silent due to pesticides. The birds or other creatures sing when the flowers bloom and humans have to curb the use of chemicals if they want to enjoy the melodies of nature and preserve it for the future generations. The literary work best represents reality. Lawrence Buell's (2005) book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* asserts that realism serves as a bridge between the world of text and human consciousness. Similarly, Carson's book presents the real situations and retells stories of everyday maltreatment of environment.

The Role of Literature in Shaping Environmental Consciousness: A Study of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*

In the beginning of the book, Carson takes her readers to a town situated in America, which is polluted with the overuse of fertilisers. An indirect blame on humans can be observed when Carson (1962) wrote: “[n]o witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life” (p. 10), but people themselves. From the quotation it is clear that humans’ intervention into the natural world put the whole generation into danger. The appeal that Carson made to save the environment holds value even today. The all pervasiveness of such chemicals can be realised when Carson wrote: “every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere” (p. 11). If one notices the aura of her book, it did not disappear with the time but has influenced the literature which is written on nature.

Carson (1962) considers humans a “part of a web of life” (p. 41). Humankind should get to know the fact that if they harm nature, they do harm to themselves as well. *Silent Spring* has received praise for its tone and style. The use of simple vocabulary leads readers to catch the meanings of what Carson intends to say. It is a tale that let us know the consequences of our actions on coming future. If these actions are not taken care of, they would result in the end of every creature. At the global level, it is a challenge to save the environment from pollution. This challenge, Carson believes, is due to the “synthetic pesticides” that are present “virtually everywhere” (p. 17). *Silent Spring* proves an eye opener for the public in providing a shift to maintain the ecological balance. The book also reveals how the policies regarding environment are politicised. It warns the governments and institutions that it is better to use less harmful means to control the insects. The natural world is more complex than it seems. For writers like Carson, it becomes more important to recognise how important humans’ place is in saving the environment.

Indeed, the natural world will always be destroyed until the anthropocentric attitude of human beings gets changed. It is the description of environment in literature that makes nature immortal. In his novels, Thomas Hardy wrote about Wessex, William Faulkner about Yoknapatawpha, Synge on the Aran Islands, and R. K. Narayan on Malgudi. Similarly, Carson (1962) has written the book *Silent Spring* about America. Literature reveals the environmental concerns and how humans’ hunger for power affect their relationship with nonhuman world. The way Wendell Berry (1977) writes about the conservation in *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* and Peter Barnes (2008) about the effects of pollution in *Climate Solutions: A Citizen’s Guide*, in the same way, Rachel Carson has penned down her book about the impact of fertilisers on environment. An anthropologist Eiseley has rightly said that Carson’s book is a must read for the readers who do not want “it to be the epitaph of a world not very far beyond us in time.” (Dunn, 2012, p. 578)

Literature has a potential to make a change in how humans change nature. It has remained a source of awareness since centuries and has portrayed relationship of human with the environment. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, movements related to environment inspired the fictional and nonfictional writings. In the first half of the 1990s, the emergence of Ecocriticism and its role could be witnessed in several disciplines, such as art and media. In the humanities, the sister disciplines of ecocriticism, such as anthropology and environmental philosophy have also focussed on nature. The present paper provides an overall view of nature and its importance in *Silent Spring* while emphasising on how the human beings treat it. It highlighted how the fertilisers were considered profitable during the 1950s, and no alternatives were adopted to stop their risks on nature. It is Carson’s book that brought forth the issues pertaining to the exploitation of nature and how future can be secured with awareness of what is happening around. Later, more people started to take initiatives to protect nature and make public aware about the dangers of chemicals. The literary pieces reflect on the environment and disasters that had happened over the years. These writings

raise a fundamental question that how far a novel or a poem can change and make earth a better place to live.

Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness by Edward Abbey (1968) foregrounds his encounters as a park ranger. The opening chapters reveal how Abbey creates a life within Arches National Monument and how he makes attempts to raise awareness about the balance of biodiversity in that region. The book is similar to the themes as presented in *Silent Spring*. In literature, a message that is wrapped in the book speaks much more than a dialogue or speech and Carson's book is an example of it.

J. G. Ballard's (2012) *The Drought: A Novel* is considered an important piece in the dystopian literature. It reveals various events of the extinction. *The Drought* is a narrative about a drought that results from the industrial waste. It raises questions of how human beings struggle to survive in the desert where everything is full of desperation. Ballard's theme equates Carson's in one way that *The Drought* narrates story of a drought and *Silent Spring* is about the seasons that have been silenced by the fertilisers.

The Man Who Planted Trees by Jean Giono (1953) is a short story about a shepherd who transforms a barren war-torn area into a garden. Turning of a desert into a place full of water and trees becomes an epitome of hope that even a small step can make a change in landscape. The renewed barren land inspires others to work for the conservation of land. Similarly, Carson's actions to protect nature have inspired many readers to walk on the same path.

Philosophically, literature helps in understanding the meaning of life. The pieces written on nature suggest that destruction results from exploitation of natural resources at the hands of humans and the crises would be handled only if mankind becomes aware of its activities that put impact on nature. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines 'ecocriticism' in an introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* as a term that highlights the relationship of humans with nature. Initially, the eco-critics wrote in the nonfiction, focussing on the narratives of nature and natural world. It is with the help of writers' personal experiences and their appreciation of environment that they paved the way for conservation of nature. The use of technology in manipulating nature is evident in every discipline.

Mckie (2012) stated that Carson's *Silent Spring* is about the "effective denunciations of industrial malpractice" (par. 7). It informs us about the effects of technology on the human and natural world. The book is a narrative of survival in the world full of threatening and effects of modernisation. Environmental writings inform us about our destructive actions that put both nature and civilization into danger. Nature writing depicts the contemporary scenario and range of eco-critical concerns. The writers like Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard and Wendell Berry visit nature to connect with nature and raise the readers' consciousness regarding conservation. Carson is also among those writers who make the readers aware about the natural world through her writings.

It is because of the impeccable tone, writing style and presentation of environmental issues that *Silent Spring* has been selected for this paper. Though it is written by Carson as a scientist, yet her tone as a litterateur can easily be observed throughout the book. While praising the writing style of Carson in *Silent Spring*, Radford (2011) writes that the book has a "controlled and authoritative" (par. 5) tone with the poetical sentences. *Silent Spring* has been divided into seventeen chapters which reflect on how environment is affected by the fertilisers.

The Role of Literature in Shaping Environmental Consciousness: A Study of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*

In the beginning of the first chapter, Carson mentions a town which full of trees, fields, birds, animals and streams. She writes that everything was good so far; the flowers bloomed, fields had crops and birds sang until a strange danger crept over the area. Later, it was found that the reason after the sudden deaths of creatures was a poisonous white powder which was found everywhere. Carson views that such town can be found in different counterparts of America and globally. The book answers a question: what has silenced the songs and lyrical voices of the season of spring? The second chapter reflects on the history of human life where an interaction between the living and the nonliving was prevalent. Carson (1962) writes that chemicals are the “synthetic creations of man’s inventive mind” (p. 12), which came into being after the advancements in technology. The purpose of humans’ engagement with the environmental issues gets manifested only when they remember that the fertilisers should not kill them along with the insects. Water is often considered an elixir, but when humans mix it with the chemical powders, they turn the potion into a poison. Carson, in the third chapter, mentions how these chemicals run through the meat of fish and milk of other animals.

The universal concern of pollution is discussed in the fourth chapter of *Silent Spring*. Carson writes that water plays an important role in human lives and it becomes our responsibility to conserve it. Soil is another element that Carson highlights in the fifth chapter. She considers it a harbinger of fertility and if we want to save nature, we should not pollute it. The sixth chapter of *Silent Spring* reflects on the greenery of trees which support the life of other creatures. Carson, in the seventh chapter, highlights how the fertilisers affect the ecology. It leads Carson (1962) to write that human beings add “a new kind of havoc” (p. 52) by killing creatures with these sprays.

Carson writes on how insects and birds are killed by the fertilisers in the eighth chapter. The chapter begins when the season of spring comes what Carson (1962) stated “unheralded” (p. 60) and the natural mornings are made silent that were full of bird songs. The animals and birds are regarded the safeguards of environment and human beings should join hands to save the natural world from these chemicals. The ninth chapter deals with the important question in which Carson stated (1962), “[w]hen will the public become sufficiently aware of the facts to demand such action?” (p. 84). The actions matter because only they can turn the poisonous rivers of fertilisers into nectars. Carson discusses the consequences of these sprays on fields in the tenth chapter. In the eleventh chapter, she asks how government can protect us from these chemicals. Carson (1962) tries to provide answer by saying: “[o]nly to a limited extent” (p. 97). The twelfth chapter reveals what great price human beings have to pay for the use of these fertilisers. Carson believes that they put an impact on our nervous system and give birth to several diseases. The thirteenth chapter also highlights the effects of pesticides on humans and other creatures. How these chemicals cause cancer has been discussed in the fourteenth chapter.

Carson asserts that humans need change the philosophy of their life in relation to nature and they should admit that nature fights back. In the fifteenth chapter, she highlights that its only when humans treat the natural world with love that we can have flowers, fruits, and rains, otherwise, the nature would fight back. The question is can we become resistant to harmful fertilisers. In the sixteenth chapter, Carson (1962) tries to provide answer to it by saying “[s]pray as little as you possibly can” (p. 143). Human beings must aim at preserving nature so that all creatures can live together in harmony. The seventeenth chapter highlights the alarming situations that humans who have invented modern techniques to kill dangerous insects, can, in turn, kill them as well.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is a testimony that a work of literature can raise the environmental consciousness. It inspires both the readers and the writers to work for the preservation of nature. Along with the discussion of the impact of fertilisers on nature, Carson's book has also reflected on the symbiotic relationship of literature with environment. She combines the scientific approach with literature in order to reflect on what happens around. Undoubtedly, Carson has left us with a legacy that everyone should follow. We owe to her whatever we have achieved in the progress of movements related to environment. Literature truly serves as a powerful tool in raising the environmental consciousness by providing perspectives, insights and narratives that connect us to nature. It reminds us of our role in sustainable and ecological future.

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Bio-note

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