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THE ROAR OF THE LONELY PANDA: EXAMINING “HEART TO HEART: A CONVERSATION ON LOVE AND HOPE FOR OUR PRECIOUS PLANET” ON SUSTAINING ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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ABSTRACT



There is an increasing need to talk about environmental conservation with young people all around the world. One of the techniques used by many authors is illustrations in picture books. “Heart to Heart: A Conversation on Love and Hope for Our Precious Planet” is one such example. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists and he advocates universal responsibility for environmental conservation. Illustrated by Patrick McDonnell, this picture book discusses the devastating effects of climate change and deforestation through an innocent panda character interacting with the Dalai Lama. Introducing children to books with role models can help to inculcate positive social behavior. It reinforces high moral values in children. This paper will discuss the tools and techniques used to appeal to the young generation and identify the concepts of ecocriticism within the text. The author has used a simplistic approach, and the text mostly targets the Western audience.

Keywords: *Anthropocentrism, Children’s Literature, Dalai Lama, Nature, Ecocriticism*

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INTRODUCTION

Picture books are a delightful genre of books designed primarily for young readers. They merge illustrations and texts to narrate stories, often combining vivid and colorful artwork that complements the narrative. These books contain minimal text on each page, focusing mostly on visual storytelling. They could cover a wide array of themes like adventure, friendship, family, and nature. They can also help in initiating a healthy conversation between children and adults. Picture books serve as an educational tool that aids in language development, vocabulary acquisition, and comprehension skills. They are often used to introduce children to new concepts, cultures, emotions, and moral lessons. Picture books are often the result of a collaboration between an author and an illustrator so that the images and the text complement each other to convey the story more effectively.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism has been advocating for environmental conservation and protection. He is primarily known for his teachings on compassion, peace, and spirituality. He has been emphasizing the importance of preserving the environment and living in harmony with nature. He has often been seen speaking on the ethical responsibility of human beings in protecting the environment for future generations. He urges citizens, government, and other organizations to take swift action against environmental degradation. It is our collective responsibility to address issues like climate change, deforestation, and pollution. He has been promoting the idea of compassionate environmental

stewardship, encouraging people around the world to opt for a sustainable lifestyle. His teachings highlight the interconnectedness of all living organisms. He supports educational initiatives that advocate for renewable energy, waste reduction, and practices that can minimize the ecological footprint. By protecting natural sites that have cultural significance, he highlights the connection between cultural heritage and environmental conservation. His holistic approach to blending spirituality and ethics has inspired many. He has highlighted the importance of environmental justice and wishes to protect the indigenous populations and ecosystems.

In this picture book, *"Heart to Heart: A Conversation on Love and Hope for Our Precious Planet"* the Dalai Lama shares insights, teachings, and personal reflections on life, spirituality, compassion, and ethics. The picture book follows a first-person narrative, throughout its construction to resonate with all its readers. The book is a collection of dialogues and writings that aim to provide guidance and inspiration to its young audience. This book represents everything that the Dalai Lama has dedicated his life to.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When we look at the current modern scenario, there is a very evident dichotomy between the human and the non-human world. Western science and technology have been influencing our interaction with nature and its combination is no longer feasible in combating the global ecological crisis. It has become man's inherent tragic flaw to violate and exploit nature. The contribution of nature has been neglected for a very long period. In such a setting,



Ecocriticism attempts to analyze how cultural and societal expansions have led to the present environmental crisis. The term ecocriticism is an amalgamation of two words – Ecology and Criticism. Its main purpose isn't limited to simply studying nature but to attempt and create a stabilized relationship between human and non-human components of the world. It is an act of coming to terms with the binary yet interdependent structures of culture and nature. The present ecological threat is a result of man voluntarily and gradually separating himself from his physical environment.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND ECOCENTRISM

When eco-critics study a literary text, they come across two opposing worldviews within the text. Anthropocentrism believes that the whole purpose of nature is to serve mankind. Human is the sovereign of nature, superior to all living beings. This ideology places humanity at the center of everything. Everything is measured in terms of a man. Western religious beliefs have successfully pushed around these ideas through colonization, industrialization, and capitalism. Western culture is accustomed to devaluing and degrading the natural world.

Ecocentrism takes into consideration the existence of other viewpoints. It does not believe in the existence of a center and hierarchical divides between the center and margin. Nature in the literary text like a novel need not be confined as merely a setting or symbol, it needs to have a greater function. Human accountability and environmental ethics then become one of the main themes of the text. Deep Ecology is a philosophical and environmental movement that emphasizes the

ineffaceable value all living beings and the ecosystem holds. It values biodiversity and the management of environmental resources.

ECOCRITICISM IN INDIA

“Religion of the Forest” is a chapter written by Rabindranath Tagore in his book *Creative Unity* (1922) that focuses on Hindu philosophy. It discusses the contradictory views of Western and Indian philosophy and their approach to nature. He states that the realization of our existence is dependent on two principles, the principle of unity and the principle of dualism. We must be able to accept the truth that all living organisms have a life of their own. Regardless of religion and culture, our approach towards nature should be spiritual. We must conclude that all that can move in this world is enveloped by God. Indian philosophy and the power of manifestation cannot be imagined by separating ourselves from our surroundings. The forest dwellers simply shifted their physical environment to gain true knowledge. True joy lies in the understanding that all things are connected, they have a common existence. Our highest purpose is not simply to exist but to self-realize and reflect. We cannot alienate or dominate our surroundings but we must comprehend its existence.

In Western dramas, nature just occasionally peeps out as a trespasser and the human characters are in the vortex. But, in Indian classical dramas, nature stands on her own. She makes her own decisions that decide the course of the character's journey. Nature is not simply a source of all our necessities. The Himalayas and many other Indian rivers are considered to be sacred. These are places of worship



that contribute to spiritual consciousness. The forest is not just a source of knowledge and freedom, it is also a source of beauty, joy, harmony, and perfection. At its core, it symbolized the universe. The forest allows us to experience our humanity because the forest culture is built on the idea of co-existence and cooperation. "The conflict between greed and compassion, conquest and cooperation, violence and harmony that Tagore wrote about centuries ago are still relevant today." (Roy, 2018) If the mechanical worldview has monotonous sameness then at the same time the forest provides us with harmony in diversity. It is a message that man should never raise a barrier of alienation between himself and his surroundings as it could hinder the creation of perfection.

The Western and the Indian civilizations represent two fundamental divisions towards nature, one believes in the spirit of conquest and the other believes in the spirit of harmony. The existence of the physical world is dependent on contrary forces- attraction and repulsion. Together they create an equilibrium. By utilizing these two forces a man could create in abundance. He could feel the power of ultimate joy in creation and renewal.

DISCUSSION

From the very first page of the picture book, there is a created boundary set between man and nature. Instead of co-existing with nature and celebrating nature, there is a dichotomy- human population and technology on one side and Mother Earth on the other side. Man has separated himself from nature and created a barrier so high that we are struggling to find a permanent solution for the global

destruction of nature. Sometimes when we can't go to the forest, the forest visits us to show our mistakes. We can gain wisdom from observing ecosystems which are different from that of ours.

A lonely panda from the Tibetan Plateau who is a victim of deforestation visits the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India to find refuge. He is homeless like the koalas in Australia and bears in the United States. The sad panda travels across the Himalayas to visit the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is an example of how a man has a greater purpose in life. His higher spiritual purpose is to be a protector and guide for others. When the panda knocks on the door, the Dalai Lama opens the door. The techniques opted for by the illustrator are very intentional. In the illustrations, the two main characters have the same physical proportions. Anthropomorphism is a very common storytelling technique in children's literature. This technique was opted by the illustrator to display equality in all living organisms. In one of the illustrated pages, we see the panda and Dalai Lama bow at each other out of respect. The wild animal panda symbolizes luck and peace. It is said to teach the importance of a positive attitude. They are considered to be gentle beings.

Dalai Lama states that every living organism wants peace and happiness, not suffering. In the images, nature is not present simply as a part of the background. Nature has been brought into the narrative and given center stage. Many of the illustrations have been kept minimalistic so that a complex topic such as nature conservation could be given more focus. To bring out the spiritual significance of nature, the Dalai Lama refers to the journey of Lord Buddha. When he was born, his



mother leaned on a tree to take support and he attained enlightenment sitting beneath a tree. Later, passed away in the forest. This aspect promotes the idea that in the beginning, middle, and end of our life's journey, we are always surrounded by nature. Nature has existed long before our existence and it has been assisting us since the beginning of time.

Nature motivates us to grow, flourish, and thrive. For the Dalai Lama, nature represents freedom and happiness. He recalls the wild he encountered along the way, as a small boy traveling across Tibet. He named different species of deer and other animals he came across. He saw wild asses and yak roaming the great plains freely. He focuses on the preservation of many wildlife species. The name of different species is accompanied by an illustration to create a personal connection with nature. The illustrator is trying to give a visual of the wild that the readers may not be aware of. The creators made sure to use local terminologies of the species to associate the wild with the geographical location. This is something that The Dalai Lama has been working on. Each human being has had different interactions with nature from their childhood. We must promote a child's interaction with nature so that they understand the importance of its preservation.

The title of the paper is inspired by the scene of the painful roar released by the gentle-faced panda. The roar represents pain, loneliness, resentment, and sadness. A message that we must seek forgiveness from all the wild animals on whom we have inflicted suffering. Human beings are the biggest troublemakers. Human activities are threatening the peace and survival of life on earth. This issue has arisen because we lack humanitarian

values and respect for living things on Earth. We human beings are the only species on earth who have the capacity and the power to destroy the earth. We must be the protector of our planet. We need higher spiritual consciousness; we must examine our mindset. Nature has been unrecognized as a part of our surroundings. Dalai Lama is hopeful that there is a real possibility for transformation. He believes in the power of compassion and altruism. The Dalai Lama and the panda looking at their reflection in the water at its core represents the need for self-reflection and radical reorientation. We must get out of habitual preoccupation and realize that we exist together. We need to look at the wider community we are connected with and recognize each other's needs and interests.

The Dalai Lama referred to the words by Shantideva, is an Indian philosopher, Buddhist monk, poet, and scholar from Nalanda. He states that true joy is felt by desiring happiness for others and there is always suffering when we desire happiness only for ourselves. Our earth is just a blue planet floating in deep space, through technology, we have been able to capture the photograph of the earth from outer space. Yet we are unable to look at the issues our environment faces on a microscopic level. We are all members of a single family sharing one little planet. Right now, we don't have any other planet to call our home other than the Earth.

Regardless of species, borders, languages, ethnicity, and race anything that happens on Earth affects us all. We need to learn to live in harmony and peace with each other and with nature. We cannot separate ourselves from the water we drink or the air we breathe. Every aspect of life on earth is



interdependent. Our well-being is connected with the environment we live in. We must be mindful of our every deed, word, and thought. It is a universal responsibility we must not run away from. Each animal or human being which has inhabited this earth has contributed to its beauty and prosperity. We must work on our inner values and develop a sense of oneness with nature and humanity. He wants this message to reach a larger audience this is why he shares the wisdom of Indian philosophy.

A peaceful mind and a peaceful heart can create a peaceful world. As the protagonist and the panda go through this journey of self-learning, the panda transforms into his true self, an animal who is a source of happiness and joy. We must be willing to shoulder the responsibility to create well-being for others. We need something called "great compassion" called "nying je chenpo" in the Tibetan language. (Pg 92) The illustrations given are precise and sufficient so that the reader's attention doesn't get shifted from the important concepts discussed by the Dalai Lama. He talks about environmental stewardship. Every thought and action that we create must be closely considered for the betterment of our planet. Dalai Lama advocates for unconditional love for nature regardless of religion. He states that the future of our planet depends on the Karma (actions) we create in the present. The Dalai Lama is a true example of a role model for young children so that they can learn the importance of social responsibility.

CONCLUSION

"*Heart to Heart: A Conversation on Love and Hope for Our Precious Planet*" serves as a platform for Dalai Lama to communicate his message of universal

responsibility, kindness, and the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of all living beings. The Dalai Lama gives a set of positive affirmations at the beginning and the end of the picture book so that the audience associates his messages with spiritualism. Topics like spiritualism and environmental conservation can be complicated for a child to understand hence this book is a good start to introduce a child to such topics. A child needs to sit with a parent or an elderly person to understand the depth of this text. This book is a perfect combination of different levels of understanding that could appeal to a child and adult alike. Finally, the Dalai Lama suggests in this book that a change in attitude can be a solution to the environmental crisis. He states,

"There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done. One is called Yesterday, and the other is called Tomorrow." (Pg 116)

"Today is the right day to love, believe, do, and mostly live positively to help others." (Pg 117)

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