



The Road Not Taken: Teaching Environmental Issues Through English Literature

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KEYWORDS

It is regretful that we haven't given any place to environmental education in our curricular activities. Even though some time back we had been directed to include this much sensitive and timely issue, we have totally failed to respond it. It means we haven't shouldered our responsibility to the upliftment of the society.

I wish to express my view on how we teachers of English can bring in environmental issues in teaching English literature. In this respect let me tell you that

'Our jobs are lovely, dark and deep / But we have to keep promises, / And miles to go before we sleep / And miles to go before we sleep.' (1)

I mean to say 'jobs' define teaching on teachers' side and learning on students' side. For both the communities this seems to be lovely yet dark and deep as there's a lot of strain on both the sides and we both have to keep promises i. e the activity of syllabus completion, assignments, drawing papers, assessment, examination, result and so on..English is mainly taught through literature and hence creative writing essential. While teaching we have to pay attention to linguistic and literary aspects.

In English literature we have many environmental issues but till today we have used only traditional angle. We have taught the students how nature has led many authors to be subjective and hence glorifying and hence moral education a part of it. We tell them how the nature stand as sign, symbol, metaphor or image and so on. Waterfalls, rivulets, hills, mountains, stones, the earth, the sky, and the moon, birds, flowers, grass and everything under the sun is glorified. But the students really don't know the realistic picture. They may perhaps turn sensitive but they don't develop any awareness to environment and this is where I want to put stress on environmental study. Let's teach whatever we are teaching but with a different angle.

I don't want to provide any comprehensive design, nor any plan but want to indicate how, till things are not changed, we can do a small thing. A little lamp certainly will provide light. We can give place to poems, short stories, essays, novels, or plays that are related to environmental issues. Clarify the object that the certain items are meant for literary as well as contemporary environmental issues. Let me clarify with a few examples. 'The Banyan Tree' by Dilip Chitre (2) is the poem. We shall talk about the writer's feelings along with syntax and semantics. But tell them about cutting trees and deforestation. We can ask a few questions to them: what happens to you when you see your favourite tree is cut down? What do they feel when their nourished tree is cut down? or What do you feel when you don't see your childhood trees? Is it only a personal loss and nothing to do with us? Does it make any difference to ecological system? What about forests turning into dry lands? Such questions will help them to relate with

their surroundings.

This way a small section for environmental study can be made covering various issues like preservation of water, rain harvesting, floods, effects of pollution, need to grow trees, balancing the ecological system, dwindling agricultural land, importance of saving light, water, petrol, avoiding the use of plastic, and many more such things.

There's a wonderful poem, 'Death and the Good Citizen' written by A. K. Ramanujan. (3) The poet is very much aware of contemporary reality. He is born Hindu but passed a lot of time in the U. S. A. There's blend of these two cultures. On his death he thinks his body either be burnt or buried. But the poet wishes that his body be recycled. He says, 'you are biodegradable, you do / return to nature: you will / your body to the nearest / hospital, changing death into small / change and spare parts; / dismantling, not de- / composing like the rest / of us.' What a great idea!

Take a small biographical piece and you can do this. Here is such a piece. 'A Gandhinian in Garhwal: Chandi Prasad Bhatt' is penned by Ramchandra Guha. (4). The narrator takes up a journey to Kumaon and Garhwal, Alaknanda river and the Himliyan areas meeting with a score of people, the role played by C. P. Bhatt in the lives of the people living in the surrounding areas, the way he changed their attitude, establishing ashramas and service centers, and ultimately bringing economic, social, and ecological changes. It also relates the birth of a well known Chipko Movement pioneered by Sunderlal Bahugana.

There are some other articles or writing. We can teach our environmental concerns through the writings of our scientists. Pick up Dr. C. V. Raman's essay 'Water: Elixir of Life'. (5) The author beautifully describes the changes brought in on either side of river Tigris, Egypt. He discusses the role of water in our lives, and points out how should we use it, preserve it, utilize it, and take up it for the means of transportation. He doesn't forget to remind us idyllic pictures that turn beautiful because of water tanks, ponds, or rivulets, rivers and the sea. Some more cases are 'Cleaner Cities' (6) or 'The Tusker's Trail' (7)

Well if we have eyes then 'The literature has not anything to show more fair:/ Dull would he be of soul who could pass by.' (8) We can have stories and novels. Khushwant Singh's 'Mark of Vishnu' could be thought of and if we want take on hand any novel go to Gita Mehta's 'River Sutra'. The work has blended the environmental issues in such a way that on reading it hardly we notice it. There are different stories that have concern with the river Narmada. The author's purpose isn't the spiritual or religious one but practical one. People come to the river for their troubles and they have solution of them. The philosophy has been explained in a scientific way. 'The Monk's Story', 'The Executive's Story', 'The Musician's Story', and 'The Minstrel's Story' can attract any one the most. They

would be sufficient to point out how in literature such a concern as well as creativity can be blended. Here it also should be pointed out that the description of nature in the work is a fantastic treat to be enjoyed.

Why should translation be left behind? There are many interesting books in Indian literature. We can pick up from any language without any bias. I would like to suggest a Bengali work "Nights and Days in the Forest" by Sunil Gangopadhyay. It is a story of four Calcutta boys going to the forest. Their experiences there would be enough for us to bring in the lesson.

Well the list can be enriched but my point is that those who deny to touch the environmental issues for education should turn to these write ups. I hope they want be despaired.

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