

ELEPHANTS AS ECOSYSTEM ENGINEERS AND THEIR PORTRAYAL IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

The research paper focuses on cleansing the eyes of Eco-Literature. Eco-Literature is usually viewed from a narrow perspective which deals with the climatic change, global warming etc; yet there are many aspects of the ecosystem like animals, plants which can be dealt in Eco-Literature. This paper aims at providing a distinct point of view concerning the present crucial state of the animals especially the giant tuskers who are the unknown engineers of the ecosystem. Literature as far as it is concerned with the stories, biographies and autobiographies which are ultimately related to one's experiences, one can find the presence of animals in fables and tales told to the children. So animals have the significance in human lives and they are the co-workers in the process of maintaining the ecosystem. This paper is a tool to highlight the importance of elephants in balancing the ecosystem with the supporting details of the books by Tarquin Hall, Ralph Helfer. It portrays the lives of elephants and serves as best examples to explain the condition of elephants in the present human dominated society. Elephants play a vital role in maintaining the biodiversity of ecosystems.

Keywords: Biodiversity Deforestation Conflict Ecosystem Elephants

Literature reflects all walks of life of human beings. It realizes both pain and healing, happiness and sorrow. With such an approach why not let literature explore the emotions of an animal too, which is also a form of living which is taken for granted as it lacks only one sense comparing to human beings. The books which speaks about gender equality, marginalization, racism and vice versa are celebrated in the literary world whereas the books about animals, the autobiographies of the wildlife conservationists are not widely read, which allows the books go unheard. Literature possesses a rich stock of various ways in which the power structure can influence and affect the humanity by centering a few and marginalizing the rest. This paper brings to light the sufferings of elephants, the human-elephant conflict and the reason why elephants are as stated ecosystem engineers.

“Man and the higher animals, especially the primates, have some instincts in common. All have the same senses, intuitions and sensations, similar passions, affections, and emotions, even the complex ones such as jealousy, suspicion, emulation, gratitude and magnanimity; they practice deceit and are revengeful”- Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man.

One may ask the question ‘why elephants are important?’ The answers may differ according to the perspective of the individuals. But considering the essentiality, of ecology the elephants are important in many ways.

Firstly, elephants are effective seed dispersers through their dung. It has the capacity to spread the seeds as far as 57kilometres and some species wholly depend on these elephants for the dispersal of seeds.

Secondly, elephants are good water diviners. During the dry season, they locate water resources and they use their tusks to dig for water which can be used by humans. They always try to keep their body engaged, either in sand or mud, which urges them to find the source of water.

Thirdly, elephants are food providers; they bring down the high branches from the trees providing fruits and leaves as food for the lower species. It can be related to the food cycle how they keep the ecosystem balanced.

At last, elephants are habitat modifiers. They create gap in vegetation makes new ways and enables alternative plant growth. These are the major contributions of elephants towards the maintenance of ecosystem.

Above all, *'elephants are important in their own rights'*.

.Tarquin Hall is a famous British writer and journalist. He was born in 1969 at London. He is a multiculturalist as he was born to an American mother and English father and spent much of his adult life in U.S.A, Pakistan, India, Kenya and Turkey. He mainly focuses on mystery. He wrote some series such as The Case of the Missing Servant (2009), The case of the Man Who Died Laughing (2010), The case of the Deadly Butter Chickens (2012) and The Delhi Detective's Handbook (2017). Hall's notable non fictions are Spectrum Guide to Namibia (1994), Mercenaries, Missionaries and Misfits (1995), To The Elephant Graveyard (2000) and Salaam Brick Lane (2005).

The book, *'To the Elephant Graveyard: A True Story of the Hunt for a Man-Killing Elephant'* by Tarquin Hall. The title itself suggests that elephant is killing people, why should an elephant kill a man unless it is disturbed? If human migrate to the lands of those giants then they in turn migrate towards the farm lands and the countryside to the habitat of humans. It is reciprocal. But the blame is wholly put on the elephants, credited as they cannot voice for the suppression. As they cannot voice out, they go wild. This story seems to be a true one which starts with a sensational news of a killer elephant, on the rampage, is attacking Assam's paddy fields and injuring many farmers. The author, the journalist, Tarquin Hall wanted to cover the situation and flies there. The local forest officials tried their level best to stop the elephant but in vain. Left powerless, they decide to call the hunters and order for its destruction. The author also mentions about the Khasi tribe, who live intimately with the elephants, they ride on their bare backs and praying to them. This shows their oneness along with the animals, but the humans invade their habitats and complain that they come to her/his lands and buying them the evil gifts of death and suffering. The land is meant for all living things. It has the principle of 'CO-EXISTENCE' and everyone are subjected to it and has to follow it for a peaceful existence. At this point Hall begins to see that the elephants are suffering, having lost their natural habitat to the destruction of the forests and modernization. Hungry, confused and with little forest to hide in, they try to adapt to domestication, but we, threaten them and drives them go wild which in turn causes all the loss. No elephant has to be blamed for the loss.

"To see wild India from the vantage point of an elephant's back is thrilling. And what becomes of the rogue and the reasons for his deadly behavior are revealed dramatically"

- The Boston Globe

Ralph Helfer is an animal behaviorist, safari leader and writer. He is also a legendary Hollywood animal trainer. He was born in 1937. He supplied wild animals for motion pictures such as *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *Quest for Fire* and *Clarence, the Cross-eyed Lion*. He also supplied animals for television shows such as *Gentle Ben*, *Daktari* and *Star Trek*. He wrote several books such as *The World's Greatest Elephant*, *Lion That Ever Lived* and *The Gentle Jungle*. His non fictions are *The Beauty of The Beast: Tales of Hollywood's Wild Animal Stars* in 1990. *Modoc: The True Story of the Greatest Elephant That Ever Lived* in 1997. *Mosey: The Remarkable Friendship of a Boy and His Elephant* in 2002. *Zamba: The True Story of the Greatest Lion That Ever Lived* in 2005. He is also worked with numerous animal celebrities including *Clarence the Cross-eyed Lion* and *Judy the Chimp*. Helfer worked with some animals such as C.J, an Orangutan, *Gentle Ben* and a black bear. Ralph Helfer is called as "animal lover". He has won awards and honors. He won Eighteen PATSY Award for his service with animals

'Modoc: The True Story of the Greatest Elephant That Ever Lived' by *Ralph Helfer* is another book which describes about the relationship between a boy named *Bram Gunter stein* and an elephant calf *Modoc*. Both of them are born the same day which easily connects them together. Being the son of an elephant trainer, even though *Bram* grows up among large animals, he tends to share a special bond with *Modoc*. His parents are *Josef* and *Katrina*. A remarkable incident is when, once *Bram* falls ill, to our amusement, *Modoc* senses it and alerts *Josef* to the fact that he has to be taken to the hospital. Eventually this happens and *Bram's* life is saved out of danger. When everything seems positive, a tragic event happens which is the sale of circus and *Modoc* is sold to *Mr. North* and will be sent to America. *Bram* feels that he should go with *Modoc*. *Modoc* and *Bram* undergo series of adventures, they are separated and again they come together and work for *Mr. North*. After some years, the author purchases *Modoc*, saves her from the human attacks and gives comfort and care. They both unite together eternally. This proves that true love is eternal whether it is between humans or with the elephants. So one should be merciful towards animals which will reciprocate the same.

Waynevisser is a multifaceted personality as a writer, speaker, poet, academic and a business man. He was born in Zimbabwe who is the author of 28 books and published over 330 chapters, articles and reports. He enjoys writing poetry and has six poetry collections: *"African Dream, I am An African, Icarus, Life in Transitt, Seize the Day, String. Donuts, Bubbles and Me, and Wishing Leaves.*

"Ode to the Elephant" by *Waynevisser* is one of the poems under his poetry collections which is addressed to an elephant. In this poem, he beautifully juxtaposes the beauty and the extinction of the elephant species which hits the readers at the face. The beginning of the poem, the elephants are referred as 'sacred' which means elephants are seen as the incarnation of Lord Ganesha and is worshipped. Yet we harm them because of the so called safety.

"The Herd moves as one" (5) seems to say that they are united which is what lacking in human beings, some of them support in saving the elephants but some are moving on and paving ways for human-elephant conflicts.

"You are one of Eden's first-born

Survivor of frozen time

Grown old and wise

Before men learned to crawl" (9 – 12)

These lines are very powerful in describing the value of elephants and their ancient heritage.

Every stanza seems to capture our attention that one cannot give a miss. This poem is rich in message about elephants. The reason why I mentioned elephants as ecosystem engineers is justified through these lines:

“You are the maker of roads

The planter of gardens

And the builder of dams” (17-19)

The way the poet unfolds the poem can very well expose the transformation of elephants from its then valuable position to its present position of extinction because of killing by poachers. The poet’s choice of words beautifully explores and exposes the concept and the state of the elephants.

“Oh, great icon of this Earth

Memory of our faded past

Conscience of our troubled present

Prophet of our hopeful future

Lead us in your gentle footsteps

On the journey to our greater selves” (27-32)

In the above mentioned works one can trace out the position of elephants, how they are treated initially, with love and care, and how they are affected and killed at present by poachers, natural deaths due to loss of habitat, lack of nutrition and water resources and the most painful part is the forced conditions under which a natural being is expected to live in, forced by the society. Lion may be the king of the jungle, but elephants are the kings of the world who play a major part in balancing the ecosystem. One knows about all the serious environmental issues all over at present, yet this is also a serious problem that many are unaware of. The basic problem here is deforestation which is a most spoken topic in the arena of eco-literature yet deforestation does not stop becomes increasing. It further brings many problems and may lead to the destruction of human life on earth. So, everyone should be aware and save the environment and hold hands to keep the earth a better place to live in.

Further research can be made in analyzing possible ways to save the elephants from extinction by reading the works of authors and wildlife conservationists. Example: Elephant Dance by Tammie Matson.

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