

Unearthing the Therapeutic Value of Nature in Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*

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Abstract: A study in the area “Therapeutic Landscapes” explores the connection between natural place and well-being. Gesler, who developed the concept of “Therapeutic Landscapes” in 1992 explains how the “healing process works itself out in places (or situations, locals, settings and milieus)” (743). The great Alps are one such therapeutic landscape which is a natural remedial place, and one will eventually forget one’s all mental and physical illness just by getting the spectacular sight of the mountain range, rocky cliffs, the glistening valleys and the pasture. About the Alpine gentians, D. H Lawrence describes as “darkening the day-time, torch-like with the smoking blueness of Pluto’s gloom” (4). The beauty, the healing magnitude and flora and fauna of Alps are vividly portrayed in one of the remarkable Swiss classics, *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri. The Alps and her little village become an inevitable part of Heidi’s daily life. The affliction which she goes through when she parts her small village shows that the very breeze, the deep blue sky, roaring of fir-trees and wild roses became one with her soul. Moreover, the Alps here act as a therapeutic landscape in restoring both Heidi and Clara Sesemann’s natural health, thereby awakening an insight towards eco-consciousness.

Index Terms – therapeutic landscapes, Alps, homesickness, eco-consciousness, psychological trauma, harmony with nature.

Heidi by Johanna Spyri is one of the best-known works of children’s fiction in Swiss Literature. It has been translated into more than fifty languages, and more than fifty million copies have been sold thereby marking the worldwide popularity as the total number of the Swiss population is only seven million. Due to its immense popularity, one of the villages in Switzerland, Oberrofel is renamed as Heidi-Land. Since then, it is the most popular tourist attraction, and it is almost like a pilgrimage for the Japanese tourist. *Heidi Grows Up* and *Heidi’s Children*, the two sequels are neither written nor recognised by Spyri but are adapted from other works by her English translator, Charles Tritten, many years after she died. The little charm, Heidi is a blessing not only to the characters in the story but to everyone who reads it. Both the milieu and the characters ring true. The very breeze and the air of Alps are wafted to the readers on every page of the novel. Every goat even has its personality. The alms uncle’s hut, the house among the pines, the shriek of an eagle and the fir trees’ roars forms a picture which no one can easily forget.

By analysing the three principal characters; Heidi, Clara Sesemann and the Doctor, the role of nature towards healing and promoting healthy environment can be traced from a very minuscule to the humongous aspects of the novel. True to the concept of “Therapeutic Landscapes” developed by Gesler, the Alps mountain ranges, and every other natural aspect acts as a catalyst in terms of natural remedy. According to the concept of therapeutic landscapes, “the healing process works itself out in spaces,” (743) which define the impact and the interconnection between the natural environment and the human soul. The recent development of a therapeutic garden actually stems from this concept of interconnection (spatial reference). The garden is designed in such a way that comprises of natural medicinal herbs, shrubs, trees and the blissful traits of nature which enriches one’s soul in both mental and physical aspects. Further, it is proved to be a very successful one when it comes to the healing process. This novel serves as the best example in outlining the impact and the significance of nature towards human’s life and livelihood. Thus, this paper as a three-fold about the analysis of three characters’ mental and physical trauma is an attempt to unfold the importance of nature (as a therapeutic landscape) and the necessity of living in harmony with nature.

Written “for children and those who love children” as its subtitle says, is a delightful story of a young orphan who after her parents’ death, comes to live with her paternal grandfather as her aunt Deta wants to be free to pursue her career. Heidi is more like a record of a typical Swiss child who relishes living amidst the beauties of her most fond mountains, her hut, and goats but eventually, destined to live for a while in Frankfurt as if in exile. Though she gets well along with everyone in Frankfurt especially with Clara, grandmother, Mr. Sesemann and with Sebastian, she suffers from homesickness, and as a consequence, she becomes a sleepwalker. Moreover, she hardly touches any food and becomes ill by crying all the day which is unaware to others knowledge and she never reveals her reason of being sad to anyone as she thinks that makes her ungrateful.

As the day proceeds, she started to miss her grandfather, her little village, the mountain – tops which she used to visit every day with Peter to a profound extent. Most pathetically, Heidi is so much connected with her life in the mountain as she couldn’t able to get rid of the trifle things such as the eagle’s screech, the roaring of fir trees, the pungent scent of wild roses and bluebells, her uncle’s goats such as Snowhopper, Schwanli, Barli, Thistlefinch, Big Turk. To add further, the very scene of her bed and the hay bathed in golden sunlight, which she used to see every morning in her home once she opens her eyes becomes inevitable part to miss. At one such incident, by misinterpreting the noise of the passing carriage as the roaring of the south-wind on the Alp, Heidi drops a pile of books and papers on the floor thereby, drenching everything with ink in her race to get the sight of the fir-trees’ rustle. Once the Doctor finds out that Heidi is the one who frightened the entire household by her sleepwalking, he suggests Mr. Sesemann that the child should be restored back to her native mountain air. The intensity of homesickness and unforgettable nature’s enchantment can be seen through the following lines:

“Oh, I have the same dream every night. I always think I am with my grandfather again and can hear the fir-trees roar. I always think about how beautiful the stars must be, and then I open the door of the hut, and oh, it is so wonderful! But when I wake up I am always in Frankfurt.” Heidi had to fight the sobs that were rising in her throat. . . . “No, but I feel as if a big stone was pressing me here” (138).

Though Heidi gets all her provisions and enriched lifestyle in Frankfurt, she becomes ill due to the absence of the natural environment (her Alps) which she exceedingly fond of. This incident shows Heidi's deep association with nature and nature's crucial role in influencing her mind and body. Heidi's return to her village and mountain life restores her mental health and she starts to bloom back as a little flower when she witnesses all her lovable relations including the goats, flora and fauna of her very Alps Mountain:

Suddenly she looked back and beheld such glory as she had not even seen in her most vivid dream. . . . The child stood still, and in her joy and transport tears ran down her cheeks. She folded her hands, and looking up to heaven, thanked the Lord that He had brought her home again. She thanked Him for restoring her to her beloved mountains, -in her happiness she could hardly find words to pray. Only when the glow had subsided, was Heidi able to follow the path again (152).

Thus, the landscape helps Heidi to retain her natural health and as a therapeutic view cures her mental illness and homesickness. Along with Heidi, one more character who suffers from psychological trauma is the Doctor due to the sudden death of his daughter. The Doctor who visits Heidi in her village eventually gets cured, effectively due to the fresh new life inhibited in every aspect of nature in the Alps as the Doctor remarks, "It is beautiful up there. Body and soul get strengthened in that place and life seems worth living again" (189). The landscape which plays a vital role in transforming him into a new man, in turn, makes him to start his new life in that very landscape as he settles in Alps at the end.

In this novel, it is evident that nature doesn't merely instil mental peace in oneself but also cures one's physical illnesses. The character, Clara Sesemann to whom Heidi gives company for study in Frankfurt visits Heidi's village with her grandmother. Also, an invalid child, Clara (who can only move around with a wheelchair) spends an entire summer in the Alps with Heidi and eventually gets stronger on goat's milk and the fresh mountain air. On seeing the changes in Clara, the grandmamma says, "'Clara, is that really you? You have red, round cheeks, my child! I hardly know you any more!'. . . The grandmamma was rooted to the spot from fear. What was this! Upright and firm, Clara walked beside her friend" (245). The primary reason behind goat's milk protein is due to the presence of medicinal herbs in the Alps, which plays a therapeutic role in healing Clara and everyone in emotional, physical and spiritual aspects.

True to Wordsworth maxim, "The silence that is in the starry sky, / The sleep that is among the lonely hills," (163-164) the novel depicts that how simple things in nature helps to cure living beings. The novel proves that the therapeutic landscape as a real medicine in comparison with any other treatments provided by the materialistic world as the invalid child Clara gets cured only through the nature despite the intake of man-made medicines. Heidi's homesickness, the Doctor's change of mind and Clara Sesemann's transformation emphasis the blissfulness in nature. Hence, the Alps as a therapeutic landscape plays a vital part in restoring Heidi and Clara Sesemann's natural health and the Doctor's mental health. Thereby, it highlights the healing magnitude of nature and its inevitable role in human's life. Apparently, the novel awakens the insight towards eco-consciousness and conveys that one should not necessarily need to fight to preserve nature but leading simple life in harmony with nature, speaks more and readily paves a path to a healthy life and livelihood.

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