



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 10. Issue.1. 2023 (January-March)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

PIONEERS OF NATURE EXPLORATION: BEYOND SPECIES SPECIFIC DISCOURSE IN
EVERYTHING THE LIGHT TOUCHES: A NOVEL BY JANICE PARIAT

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Article information

Received:15/1/2023
Accepted: 10/2/2023
Published online:17/2/2023
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.10.1.24](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.10.1.24)

ABSTRACT

The search for knowledge has captivated the minds of human beings for centuries. History presents various evidence about the efforts taken by humans. The journey begins when people consider themselves pioneers in the quest, where raw evidence and experience is cherished by the people undertaking the quest. They become primary researchers whose aim is to discover a difference which has not been revealed to the world. They envision themselves as green explorers and do not rely entirely on evidence gathered by their forerunners. Passion for nature drives such people and the quest itself is a narrative that cannot be ignored which is fuelled by a communication which is beyond species specific discourse. In *Everything The Light Touches* by Janice Pariat, the characters are ecological pioneers who diminish the line between professional biologists and common humans with a passion for nature. Nature's ability to reveal the power of amateurs is presented in the novel with four different narratives that shape the work. This paper will present the efforts taken by pioneers during the ecological journey in communicating with nature. Aspects of plant bias, plant empathy and nature connectedness will be discussed. Nature's ability to turn amateurs into professionals will be highlighted.

Key words: ecocriticism, plant blindness, nature connectedness, plant empathy, species specific discourse.

Introduction

The affection a person has for plants cannot be measured. The knowledge gained by experience is more priceless than the ones treasured in books. These ideas provided by Janice Pariat in her work *Everything the Light Touches: A Novel*, presents a different view of nature connectedness. Ecocriticism helps in understanding the work clearly. The novel has four stories which highlight the greatness of nature. Evelyn's life as sketched by Janice Pariat, presents a passionate nature admirer whose grandmother was an inspiration. Though the chapter is titled "Evelyn", her grandmother dominates the pages and there are instances where Evelyn is nostalgic about her grandmother. Grandma Grace, who is not alive as the novel proceeds, appears alive because of the impact she has made on young Evelyn when she was a kid. The memories drive Evelyn to explore nature and become a

botanist. Grandma Grace's life is presented as a biography of a true botanist even though she was not a graduate. The affection the grandmother showers on Evelyn is not accepted by others. Evelyn's mother never supported her when Evelyn spent time with nature. The mother hated Grace for teaching her daughter about nature. The society never appreciated grandma Grace but this did not become a hindrance for the grandmother's love for nature. This is presented in the novel:

Certainly not grandma Grace, who gained little regard from her own daughter, or her neighbours, for "tramping around" gardens and forests, not for exercise or improvement, which would have rendered the activity somewhat respectable, but unforgivably, for clear, unadulterated joy. (Pariat 100)

The exploration

Various instances in the novel show the influence of grandma Grace on young Evelyn. The discourse created to stimulate a conversation with nature attracts Evelyn to a great extent. The usage of personification makes the child value nature as a living creature with life in place of a dead one. The mind accepts the idea that plants are to be taken care of because they are living just like humans. The conversation the grandmother has with the plants makes Evelyn appreciate nature and her grandmother for being considerate. The discourse is not species specific but transcends speciesism, and connects different species together. Here the discourse between the grandmother and her peas and pumpkins tends to remove the barrier between species and presents harmony between flora and humans. This serves as the core idea which can prevent global warming when people give importance to nature. This starts with a perception, an idea, and a discourse where speciesism is not ruling the conversation. The plant is given the choice to be accepted as a creature which is equally important to a human. The conversation when read presents a greater understanding:

And she believed her, for Grandma Grace spent hours outside, in a hat and scarf, with a basket in hand, and she talked about her plants as though they were intimate confidants. "My sweet peas are feeling poorly today," or "The pumpkin requests to be moved somewhere less shaded." (Pariat 100)

A similar conversation is presented in *The Music of Bees* where the Alice interprets the communication of bees to Jake:

He watched the bees zipping in and out of the headlights.

"They sound mad," he said.

Alice shook her head. "No, they aren't mad. More like confused." ...

"They're just kind of talking to each other right now, making sure everyone is all right. They're supposed to be in their boxes. Some fell out of the truck when I hit the fence." (Garvin 54)

The grandmother teaches Evelyn to garden. A separate patch is allotted for the young girl and she experiments with nature. She becomes a pioneer for herself exploring the hidden nature of herself. The grandmother is also a pioneer as she learns about nature by experimenting with it, and she seldom relies on the former knowledge gained by others. This is evident when the books gifted to the grandmother are not read but they remain static in the bookshelves. The grandmother, though a minor character, becomes important in the narrative because of the impact she has on her granddaughter.

The way Evelyn feels like a pioneer in the field of botany is evidently displayed in the work through ecocriticism which presents an ecocritical understanding. Though she had taken efforts to learn the subject from books, she feels that she has not completely understood the subject because she has detached herself from nature. She contrasts learning in a lab to the days she spent exploring nature with her grandmother. This makes her appreciate nature in the forest instead of appreciating it from an artificial environment. Nature connectedness remains incomplete when botanists remain solely on books and not on nature. The relationship between humans and plants becomes complete only when they spend time with each other. When this is absent, mere theoretical knowledge does not ensure nature connectedness.

Evelyn decides to travel to India in search of a unique plant which is almost like an archetype. This quest appears like a travelogue as it documents her ideas and experiences. Through this journey, Evelyn can understand the intricacies in the relationship between humans and nature. While the tribal community cherishes the natural landscape the humans who approach the place appear as hypocrites.

Evelyn is taken to the place where the sacred plant can be found, and Mr. Dossett who secretly follows finds the plant and decides to uproot it completely. This shows the plant blindness which is present even among people who appear to value nature. These individuals tend to appreciate nature but are blind towards the importance of plants. They also lack empathy towards plants. Without plant empathy, they appear like people who promote deforestation and they are seen as false botanists who seldom care about the importance of new species. Evelyn gets wounded when she tries to prevent the man from uprooting the plant. The tribal community lives in close harmony with nature and they do not disclose the secrets of nature easily to the foreigners. Evelyn finds out that the man uprooted the wrong plant as the real sacred plant is revealed to be in a different place. The tribal community decides to reveal the real plant to Evelyn later as she has true love towards nature unlike Mr. Dossett. This shows the way humans have distanced themselves from nature and highlights the truth that they value fame more than the life of a plant. The life of the tribal community contrasts with that of the foreigners who approach the place with hidden intentions. When their motive is not pure, the motif (the plant) remains hidden.

Shai's story presents another view towards nature. She is surrounded by minor characters who become major characters in the minds of the readers because of their relationship with nature. They are also pioneers in a way as they explore nature through their own effort. Shai's father takes efforts to prevent the destruction of trees and he seldom stays inside the house. The forest becomes his place of stay and he decides to protect it from people. The steps he takes are small experiments which help him save trees in the locality. He cannot accept the death of plants which is similar to how the protagonist of *The Last Migration* by Charlotte McConaghy feels. The protagonist, a bird lover, shows how she is disturbed by the death of birds, and wants people to understand that they should not be killed and enslaved:

I have always been frightened of dead things, birds more so than anything else. There is nothing so disturbing as a creature born to flight being bound to dull lifelessness. (McConaghy 47)

Shai appreciates the father's relationship with nature but not others who show traces of plant blindness. Shai's mother does not appreciate nature and the people who decide to uproot trees also lack empathy. The loss of plant empathy enables the people to plot a method to destroy plants.

Shai's nanny teaches her tales and folklore inspired by nature and this inspires Shai to a large extent. Shai is introduced to nature by the nanny and she is amazed at the magnificence of nature. The presence of magical elements and fantasy has enabled Shai to become curious about nature promoting a mental nature connectedness, where one feels closer to nature in the mind. The initial proximity with nature in the mind, paves way for Shai to become a pioneer as she explores nature from her view point and presents a subjective aspect towards botanical studies. The emotion one feels towards nature cannot be ignored and this cannot be captured in books which merely focus on theory. The mental nature connectedness becomes a seed which enables the characters to become pioneers in their quest for knowledge. Shai explores nature as she stays with her nanny who is almost on the verge of death, and both remain pioneers as enabled by their passion for nature in the remote regions of the place. The importance and need for people to be closer to nature is presented by Richard Mabey where he wants people to become foragers to establish a strong bond with nature:

There was a growing public worry that our food was becoming toxic and bland, parallel with a concern that we were 'losing touch with nature'... I reminisced about a vanishing local knowledge of wildings, the root source of all our cultivated vegetables. And I talked excitedly about a lost world of exotic scent and flavour... (Mabey 82)

Goethe's narrative is a blend of biography and fiction which enables the reader to understand the plot clearly. His attempt to redefine botanical classification makes him a true pioneer and his efforts prove the same.

Goethe embraces the wild, free aspect of nature and is against the attempts of classification carried out by his contemporaries. He appears like an amateur in his journey, with the people around him not believing his efforts initially. Ecocriticism throws light upon the imaginative dialogue which he initiates with the plant species to understand them better. This again is not species specific as it connects humans and plants. The species-specific discourse is ignored, but the communication that happens between the plants and Goethe are presented in the work. This discourse enables Goethe to get closer to plants and understand the fact that a plant is always changing as it grows and that it cannot be studied as a static creature. The conversation between the plant and Goethe becomes the leading factor for his finding and it also promotes nature connectedness:

“A way by which to strive close to what is being studied, to learn what the plant has to tell us, rather than to impose on it what we already believe.”

Moritz leans closer to the bush. “How does one do this?”

In Goethe’s voice, a tremor of excitement. “If we wish to behold nature in a living way, we must follow her example and make ourselves as mobile and flexible as nature herself.” (Pariat 190)

This is comparable to what Helen Macdonald has presented about her relationship with a hawk in the work *H is for Hawk*:

To train a hawk you must watch it like a hawk, and so you come to understand its moods... Eventually you don’t see the hawk’s body language at all. You seem to feel what it feels. Notice what it notices... It’s part of being a watcher, forgetting who you are and putting yourself in the thing you are watching (Macdonald 86)

Goethe’s ability to initiate a discourse with nature is not understood by people exhibiting plant blindness in the narrative. A couple who are also travelling with him are unable to understand nature’s beauty as enjoyed by Goethe. They tend to lack plant empathy. Goethe remains a pioneer connecting with nature and this enables him to sketch plants in his book after conversing with them. Goethe’s friend is against his desire to travel to places in search of plants, but the passion Goethe has does not make him stop his exploration.

Linnaeus presents his views on how to be a true pioneer with a poetical language. He presents insights about nature in simple terms. One aspect he presents is about the common elm. This tree, though named as common elm, depends on the person observing the elm and the place where it is found. For a person observing the tree without plant blindness for the first time, this does not remain common because it is a species observed for the first time by the onlooker. The place also matters and the way language shapes this is presented in the work as:

The next morning, I rise with the sun in order to examine

this wonderful tree, which is pointed out to me from a distance.

It proves nothing more than a common elm. Hence however, I learn

that elm is not a common tree in this part of the country. That is all. (Pariat 216)

Conclusion

He also presents the life of Laplanders who live close to nature and can distinguish cattle which appear similar to any common man. The secret discourse they share with nature helps them remain unique in their approach of understanding cattle. Barry Lopez presents the importance of being close with nature as a tool for nature connectedness in the Arctic *Dreams*:

The plane is a great temptation; but to learn anything of the land, to have any sense of the relevancy of the pertinent maps, you must walk away from the planes. You must get off into the country and sleep on the ground, or take an afternoon to take a tussock apart. Travel on the schedule of muskoxen. (Lopez 285)

The ability of characters to exhibit a communication beyond species specific discourse helps them establish a relationship with nature. Green ways come to light when plant blindness is removed, and plant empathy is embraced. This is where true pioneers begin their journey with nature connectedness.

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