

Can Humans Make Earth Silent? An Ecocritical Reading of *Silent Spring*

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ABSTRACT

Ecological consciousness and environmental activism are today's keen areas of observation and discussion. Since literary works represent social scenario and target consciousness raising, they have a vital role. All the world nations confront with several environmental hazards which chiefly occur due to human over interference. Rachel Carson, the well known American scientist and author influenced the society with her literary work *Silent Spring*. In her work, she passionately criticizes the over exploitation of the environment for human egocentric motives. Her book is efficacious that it could influence reducing the over-usage of chemical pollutants, especially DDT. *Silent Spring* proves that no political power or authority can silence genuine voices.

Keywords: ecological consciousness, ecocriticism, chemical pollutants, activism.

Ecological consciousness and environment protection have become the most pertinent terms of the current era since people and nations are desperate with disasters, calamities, and their increasing consequences like climate change. Delegates sit around the table of deliberations just to realize that ecological issues and environmental threats are beyond human control. Quite contrary to preceding centuries, thoughtful minds recommend for the emerging obligation for environmental thinking and activism. A paradigm shift from the anthropocentric strategies to an ecocentric sustainable development schemes has become mandatory.

Literature has a significant role in instructing and enlightening people on the pros and cons of contemporary social issues. It was during the 1980s, ecocriticism, a special school that identifies the relationship between literature and the physical environment emerged. Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, William Rueckert, Aldo Leopold, and Greg Garrard are the chief exponents of ecocritical studies. Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) states: "Eco criticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human" (Introduction xix). This paper focuses on the ecological perspective shared by Rachel Carson, a reputed American scientist through her seminal work *Silent Spring*.

Carson published *Silent Spring* (1962) during the post war period in which people were cognizant of atomic war repercussions. She highlighted the explicit menace of pesticide abuse and became the first writer who got public attention for the same. "She deliberately took on the most cherished tenets of the scientific establishment and, with an unquenchable anger at what she considered the 'senseless and brutish things' that human beings were doing in their war against nature, tried to make us look at what we were doing to life in the name of progress" (Lear, Afterword 260). Carson received harsh criticism and threat such as condemnation in the press and attempts to ban the book by the chemical industry.

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These critics fell roughly into two categories. In the first were those who were members of the scientific community. The writers were almost all men. Almost all of them found the research undertaken by Carson for the book to be suspect; many of them questioned Carson's credentials, calling her an "amateur" or a mere "scientific journalist." Many also dismissed her writing as "emotional" and lacking the kind of cold, rational risk assessment required of modern applied science. (Smith 736)

But all those campaigns and efforts to silence her were found not only futile, but also added more publicity. Before long, the American society recognized that Carson wrote for the public welfare and her ecocentric outpourings are greatly significant for human development.

Ecocritical analysis of a literary work focuses on the depiction of external environment. This includes all elements of the ecosystem-biotic and abiotic alike. The Earth is our common home and in this planet, as Barry Commoner observes, "Everything is connected to everything else" (qtd. in Glotfelty xix). According to John Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, Earth is Mother to all creations. This Mother figure is the embodiment of all maternal features and qualities such as love, tenderness, care, and nurturing. What she expects from her children is gratitude and filial affection. Unfortunately, human community as a whole, and each human being individually treats the Mother as someone who is obliged to do the nurturing tasks. All her resources- water, air, wild life, vegetation, food materials, energy resources- are taken for granted and exploited. As a result, we have reached as Glotfelty observes, "the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems" (xx).

Human reasoning gives emphasis to the intrinsic value of objects and organisms. But he easily forgets that a microbe or microscopic being has its own worth in the wide web of life. Carson highlights the sinister aspects of man's technological progress. In her opinion, everything in this universe has its own value- the caterpillar, moth, ant, mosquito, and robin all have contributed much to the human counterparts in their journey of achievement. According to Lauren McKee, "Carson could see the incredible scale of loss inflicted in our ecosystems, the reduction in what we now all biodiversity, and she lamented the campaign for mass chemical control and another symptom of our exaggeratedly technological and quantitative approach" ("Rachel Carson").

Silent Spring is "the story of the use of toxic chemicals in the countryside and of the wide spread destruction of wildlife in America" (Shackleton, Introduction 11). Carson succeeded in creating a new public awareness of the environment which led to changes in Government policy and inspired the modern ecological movement. The book has seventeen chapters and in each, Carson portrays human involved crucial ecological hazards. Julian Huxley remarks in the preface, "ecology in the service of man cannot be merely quantitative or arithmetical: it has to deal with total situations and must think in terms of quality as well as of quantity. One conflict is between the present and the future, between immediate and partial interests and the continuing interests of the entire human species" (20).

Carson in her fascinating strategy of story-telling, begins her classic with an elaborate description of nature's pristine beauty:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of colour that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the autumn mornings. (21)

This idyllic American town with bursting fields, orchards, birds, fish, and wild flowers has a universal appeal. The sudden appearance of "strange stillness" (22) strikes the ambience completely, transforming it into sickness and death. An eerie silence reigns due to the inexplicable illness for

humans and birds. "On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, birds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence over the fields and woods and marsh"(22). This silent American town shares the gloomy picture of man silencing his immediate environment.

Carson observes the link between different town areas and its ecosystem. Her effort to substantiate that when one portion is disturbed, other parts are also adversely affected. Towards the end of the fable, Carson introduces the villain behind this heinous deed: "No witchcraft, no enchantment, but 'the people had done it themselves' (22). Human beings are liable for the 'white grain powder,' (22) the pesticides that they used ruthlessly. "Along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has become the contamination of the total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm," (25) Carson states that this powder (DDT) is catastrophic for human society.

Carson steps out of the fictional world and speaks directly in the following pages which emphasize on the unreasonable human involvement in the ecosystem resulting in global ecological crisis. Chemical pollutants are her target area on which she has collected every possible scientific evidence. The author's unique combination of lyrical prose and accurate science make the pages of *Silent Spring* influential. "The Obligation to Endure," criticizes human egotistic attempts to control and bring in environmental changes. "We allow the chemical death rain to fall as though there were no alternative, whereas in fact there are many, and our ingenuity could soon discover many more given opportunity," (28) says the author. This happens due to the human alienation from the scientific knowledge and information. Carson accuses the inclination towards industrialization in which the right to make a dollar at whatever cost is seldom challenged" (28). Carson is not against chemical insecticides, but challenges only their indiscriminate usage.

Carson's title "Elixirs of Death," is contradictory since the word "elixir" usually evokes notions of life. The author tries to make the readers aware regarding the surrounded killers like pesticides, especially DDT. In her opinion, "the sudden rise and prodigious growth of an industry for the production of man-made or synthetic chemicals with insecticidal properties" is a "child of the Second World War" (31). Carson, the biologist observes that the synthetic insecticides have enormous biological potency. "They have immense power not merely to poison but to enter into the most vital processes of the body and change them in sinister and often deadly ways" (32). Her titles demonstrate her attempts to highlight man's relentless struggle to subdue nature.

Human ignorance and indifference towards the most precious resource-water is sarcastically portrayed in "Surface waters and Underground Seas." Brian Litmans and Jeff Miller observes: "pesticides pollute significant areas of our air and water, threaten endangered species, and continuously expose farm workers, women of reproductive age and children to harmful levels of chemicals" (5). Her message to society ignores the dearth for uncontaminated water and Carson raises queries on possibilities of man's survival without the life giving and pure water resources:

The pollution entering our waterways comes from many sources: radioactive wastes from nuclear reactors, laboratories, and hospitals; fall out from nuclear explosions; domestic wastes from cities and towns; chemical wastes from factories. To these is added a new kind of fallout- the chemical sprays applied to croplands and gardens, forests and fields. (*Silent Spring* 50)

Carson observes that dramatic evidence of the presence of chemicals is there in streams and public water supplies. Chemical pollution is unseen and invisible which contaminate drinking water resources. As Carson reminds, "in a very real and frightening sense, pollution of the ground-water and pollution of water everywhere" (53). Her message "nothing exists alone," (60) is made clear through the vivid description adopted here. In order to understand the harsh realities of pollution, Carson speaks on another important resource, soil in "Realms of the Soil." Since human life depends on

agriculture, soil is one of the most important elements and vice versa, "soil depends on life, its very origins and the maintenance of its true nature being intimately related to living plants and animals" (61).

Carson's view "water, soil, and the earth's green mantle of plants make up the world that supports the animal life of the earth" (69) is challenging to the anthropocentric attitude of the modern society. In "Earth's Green Mantle," the author accuses our "singularly narrow" (69) approach towards plants and wild forests. Modern man seldom recognizes that "the earth's vegetation is part of the network of life in which there are intimate and essential relations between plants and the earth, between plants and other plants, between plants and animals" (69). Carson scientifically proves her arguments that vegetation, animals, birds, wild bees, and pollinating insects are indispensable and equally important for human life.

The chapter "Needless Havoc" presents the "direct killing of birds, mammals, fishes, and indeed practically every form of wildlife by chemical insecticides indiscriminately sprayed on the land" (87). Carson introduces two villainous characters: "the man with a spray gun" and the "pesticide salesman" both are concerned on their material benefits only. "Man with a spray gun" is a phrase Carson employs to describe the militaristic fervour with which pesticide users have carried out their project to eradicate all insects. This man has ignored the balance of nature" (Smith 747). Carson's emotional appeal while narrating the death of birds and animals, urges the reader to rethink and negotiate his self-centred motives and accept an eco-friendly lifestyle. According to the ecocritical perspective, everything in the universe is interconnected and hence interdependent. Man cannot ignore any species since the weakest strand represents the web's strength.

"And No Birds Sing" depicts the author's forceful and effective lament. "Over increasingly large areas of the United States, spring now comes unheralded by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song" (100). The grief-stricken author on sudden vanishing of birds, reminds the readers that the "spring is silent" now. Records reveal disturbing facts of heavy mortality among more than twenty other species of ground-feeding birds whose food- worms, ants, grubs, or other soil organisms-has been poisoned (106). It is reasonable to understand that all birds and mammals which are heavily dependent on earthworms or other soil organisms for food are threatened by the chemical pollutants.

Carson in her characteristic narrative style describes the effect of pesticides on river life, especially the death of salmon in "Rivers of Death". Overflown pesticides reach rivers and are threat to fish, crab, frog, oysters, and other aquatic life and thus rivers, usually associated with life and regeneration brims with pollution and death. "It has been known for several decades that aquatic life may concentrate or "bio-accumulate" certain pesticides. In addition, aquatic organisms may be so sensitive to the presence of pesticides that they serve as more refined indicators of pesticide contamination than chemical assays" (Litmans and Miller 11).

In the chapter "Indiscriminately from the Skies," Carson criticizes the changed public attitude towards poison. Spray falling from airplanes is poison "showered down indiscriminately" on the entire planet. She criticizes the gypsy moth programme which caused a vast amount of damage to the ecosystem. In 'Beyond the Dreams of the Borgias,' Carson argues that medicines and poisons have traditionally been respected as dangerous and in need of careful use. But unfortunately, our kitchens, gardens, washing, and cooking places, etc. are exposed to poisons:

Gardening is now firmly linked with the super-poisons. Every hardware store, garden-supply shop, and supermarket has rows of insecticides for every conceivable horticultural situation. Those who fail to make wide use of this array of lethal sprays and dusts are by implication remiss, for almost every newspaper's garden page and the majority of the gardening magazines take their use for granted. (160)

This indicates the alarming usage of chemical insecticides which ultimately silence the nature ecosystem, and mankind. In "The Human Price" Carson deals with the requirement of public health maintenance. She invites our attention to serious diseases and health hazards due to our exposure with the pollutants. For the temporary destruction of insects and pests humans have to pay high price as Carson reminds, "Confusion, delusions, loss of memory, mania," (177) etc.

Carson's views in "Through a Narrow Window" focuses on the cell that provides a narrow window to the bigger picture of the impact on nature. "One in Every Four" deals with the link between chemicals and cancer. Today's world is filled with cancer-producing agents. But the most crucial factor by the way, is that man creates his own destiny. In "Nature Fights Back," the author ridicules human usage of chemicals on nature which retorts in unforeseen ways. Thus *Silent Spring* is "the expression of Rachel Carson's outrage at humankind's crude tampering with the physical world which she has always thought inviolate. Her critique of the culture that condoned such roughshod carelessness very deliberately attacked the institutions and power structure supporting the technology" (Foote 744).

Carson in "The Rumbblings of an Avalanche," speaks about the notion of the survival of the fittest. Many insects are resistant to pesticides. Spraying destroys the weaker of a species; while the stronger ones survive. The author indicts the "dictatorial nature of science and its star chamber of practitioners who make decisions that effect everyone, destroying a part of the world without consent" (Smith 747). And in "The Other Road," Carson proposes two choices to humanity. The first, easier option is the use of indiscriminate chemical use, which will call upon environmental catastrophe. The other choice is rather difficult, to explore alternatives to chemicals. This is a slower, but healthier choice. Here we get reference to the American poet Robert Frost's eponymous poem, "The Road Not Taken" where majority chooses the easier path, and it is adventurous to choose the "road less travelled."

Rachel Carson understood the modern world as a troubled space. According to Linda Lear, "*Silent Spring* translated the central truth of ecology: that everything in nature is related to everything else. It carefully explained how laying down a barrage of synthetic pesticides, and by analogy, the product of any other biological technology, might produce something different than the expected single outcome" (258). Influence of this literary work is exemplary that "for the first time in history Carson charged, 'every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals from the moment of conception until death.' Her critique so impressed US President John F. Kennedy that he ordered an examination of the subject pesticide misuse by his President's Science Advisory Committee" (Lear 259).

Rachel Carson "deplored the increasing exploitation of resources and the cultural tendency to see the nature world as little more than an aggregate of impersonal commodities, rather than an integrated, organic and living whole," (264) says Linda Lear. Extermination of pests is a utopian idea. What humans can try is only controlling them. And if that control is through organic strategies it would have been healthy and sustainable. "Indeed the very idea of extermination is un-ecological according to Julian Huxley.

Ecocritics have a significant role to play in the context of global ecological threats and hazards. Carson, as a scientist and teacher put her whole hearted efforts to educate humanity regarding the aftermaths of using chemical pollutants such as insecticides and pesticides. *Silent Spring* successfully depicts human efforts to make the universe silent and sterile. Each page of this best seller is filled with ecological implications such as species extinction, deforestation, and spoiling natural habitats through pollution. "Nature per se is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body" (Glotfelty xxiii). In this sense, *Silent Spring* is truly ecocritical.

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