

A Cognizant Study of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring In the light of Ecocriticism

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Abstract

Ecocriticism in *Silent Spring* refers to the critical analysis of Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" through the lens of environmentalism, examining how the text portrays the harmful effects of pesticides on the ecosystem, highlighting the interconnectedness of humans and nature, and critiquing the human tendency to exploit the environment for economic gain, essentially laying the foundation for the modern ecocriticism movement. *Silent Spring* seeded important new ideas in the public mind that spraying chemicals to control insect populations can also kill birds that feed on dead or dying insects. That chemicals travel not only through the environment, but through food chains. Those chemicals that don't outright can accumulate in fat tissues causing medical problems later on, and that chemical can be transferred generationally from mothers to their young. These were ideas new to the public consciousness, and paramount among them was the notion that life is much more interconnected and interdependent than people assumed or understood.

Literature truly serves as a powerful tool in raising the environmental consciousness by providing perspectives, insights and narratives that connect us to nature. It reminds us of our role in sustainable and ecological future. The present paper examines the role of literature in raising people's awareness about the environment; the issue that is of much importance today. From being an environmentalist to a storyteller, Carson's writing style influenced people to work for the preservation of environment and still doing the same. The paper clarifies how the book which was penned down in the twentieth century inspires readers in the present times as well.

Keywords: Literature, Environment, Consciousness, Future.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, was a landmark in the development of the modern environmental movement. Carson's scientific perspective and rigor created a work of substantial depth and credibility that sparked widespread debate within the scientific community and the broader public about the effect of pesticides on the natural world. These discussions led to new policies that protect our air, our water, and, ultimately, our health and safety. Carson's book promoted a paradigm shift in how chemists practice their discipline and helped to establish a new role for chemists in investigating the impact of human activity on the environment. The legacy of *Silent Spring* continues today in the chemistry community's increased focus on green chemistry practices and the public's heightened support for sustainability in all areas of our lives.

The title of *Silent Spring* is quite appropriate. It evokes the feeling of sadness and demands action because spring as a season is full of life and it suddenly grows silent due to pesticides. The birds or other creatures sing when the flowers bloom and humans have to curb the use of chemicals if they want to enjoy the melodies of nature and preserve it for the future generations.

In *Silent Spring*, Carson assembled information on chemicals used in aerial sprayings, in industrial settings, and on food to characterize the impacts of these agents in ecological terms rather than simply portraying the effectiveness of the chemical solutions. Carson built her case on science. She did extensive research, citing dozens of scientific reports, conducting interviews with leading experts, and reviewing materials across disciplines.

Silent Spring is a work of literature that can raise the environmental consciousness. It inspires people to work for the preservation of nature. Carson's book reflects the symbiotic relationship of literature with environment. Undoubtedly, Carson has left us with a legacy that everyone should follow. We owe to her whatever we have achieved in the progress of movements related to environment.

Literature plays a very important role in making people aware about the environmental degradation. It raises environmental consciousness and fosters empathy in the readers towards the natural world. Literature weaves narratives around what has happened globally. It engages the readers intellectually and emotionally with the complex issues of environment challenges. It has a power to humanize the environmental issues by presenting how it affect the individuals and the communities. Literature provides the readers with perspectives that help them in getting insights for a sustainable future. The lasting impact of literature on the societies can be observed in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962).

Carson played a significant role in bringing forth the dangerous effects of fertilizers and pesticides on the environment. The movement by Carson warned the public about how these pesticides harm the living organisms. Although she faced several challenges and threats from the chemical industries and faced the controversies, yet she kept fighting for the preservation until the excessive use of fertilizers was banned. It is through her book *Silent Spring* that Carson accomplished it all.

Rachel Carson, an acclaimed environmentalist and biologist was born on 27 May 1907 in Springdale, Pennsylvania, U.S., and died on 14 April 1964 in Maryland, U.S. While praising Carson, Griswold (2012) called her the "first environmentalist of the modern era" (par. 35). Carson started her writing career as a biologist, but she dedicated the latter part of her life to nature writing. She views that science is an inseparable part of nature. It is with the help of scientific approach that humans can understand the natural phenomena. Carson has received the international acclaim for her books: *Under the Sea Wind* (1941), *The Sea Around Us* (1951), *The Edge of the Sea* (1955) and *Silent Spring* (1962). These books are regarded landmarks in creating the environmental consciousness.

When the World War II broke out in the 1950s, several new technologies were developed in order to help the military. Later, these technologies were put into use to improve people's life

style. Instead of contributing to make the lives of people better, these technologies worsened the circumstances even more. The chemicals that were invented to save several crops from the attacks of insects started to harm humans. It was because of these effects of fertilizers that Rachel Carson began her journey of research on the natural world. She found a great amount of fertilizers and pesticides on plants, weeds and birds. *Silent Spring* by Carson (1962) resulted from the critical findings that she came across during the research conducted by her to know the reason of deaths that had occurred in America.

Carson's importance in contributing to the preservation of environment cannot be undermined. Lear (2002) stated that Carson's *Silent Spring* offers a 'national debate' on the use of fertilizers. The book highlights the issue of how pesticides put impact on the life of creatures. Carson (1962) wrote that no "civilization can wage relentless war" without destroying itself (p. 59). She collected information about how sprays used on food put an impact on the ecology. Extensive research including interviews and reports obtained from different disciplines helped Carson in sowing the seeds of awareness in public. The major finding that Carson discovered was that the chemicals killed birds which fed on the dying insects; that had already taken chemicals from different kinds of food.

The whole food chain gets affected by these chemicals. The movement that Carson started was not a call for an immediate ban on these pesticides but made people aware about their less use. Carson writes that civilization progresses with "great speed, but at its end lies disaster" (p. 144). The quote reveals a kind of emphatic warning to people that if they continue to progress the way they are doing without thinking about its impact, the day is not far when the humankind would end itself.

The fertilizers still the songs of birds and insects. Carson mentions the all pervasiveness of these fertilizers which are found in the farms, gardens and forests. While criticizing Carson, Darby (2012) writes that she did not accept the views of "knowledgeable scientists" and viewed that her "book should be ignored" (p. 3). Whereas, some critics had the words of praise for her scientific attitude and the approach she adopted to craft these experiences into a literary work. Her emphatic appeal led readers to sympathize with her and follow her message of conservation. Carson adopted a hybrid approach including both the emotional and the factual arguments. All the facts of life are interrelated and purpose of literature becomes successful if it represents all these facets. Lear (1993) states that *Silent Spring* is a reflection on the role of "humanity in nature" (p. 27). It is through the book that Carson started a movement at the ground level which became famous at the international level.

Carson's book presents the real situations and retells stories of everyday maltreatment of environment. In the beginning of the book, Carson takes her readers to a town situated in America, which is polluted with the overuse of fertilizers. The appeal that Carson made to save the environment holds value even today. If one notices the aura of her book, it did not disappear with the time but has influenced the literature which is written on nature.

Silent Spring has received praise for its tone and style. The use of simple vocabulary leads readers to catch the meanings of what Carson intends to say. It is a tale that let us know the

consequences of our actions on coming future. If these actions are not taken care of, they would result in the end of every creature. At the global level, it is a challenge to save the environment from pollution.

Silent Spring proves an eye opener for the public in providing a shift to maintain the ecological balance. The book also reveals how the policies regarding environment are politicized. It warns the governments and institutions that it is better to use less harmful means to control the insects. The natural world is more complex than it seems. For writers like Carson, it becomes more important to recognize how important human's place is in saving the environment. Indeed, the natural world will always be destroyed until the anthropocentric attitude of human beings gets changed. It is the description of environment in literature that makes nature immortal.

Carson (1962) has written the book *Silent Spring* about America. Literature reveals the environmental concerns and how humans' hunger for power affect their relationship with nonhuman world. The way Wendell Berry (1977) writes about the conservation in *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* and Peter Barnes (2008) about the effects of pollution in *Climate Solutions: A Citizen's Guide*, in the same way, Rachel Carson has penned down her book about the impact of fertilizers on environment. An anthropologist Easley has rightly said that Carson's book is a must read for the readers who do not want "it to be the epitaph of a world not very far beyond us in time." (Dunn, 2012, p. 578)

Literature has potential to make a change in how humans change nature. It has remained a source of awareness since centuries and has portrayed relationship of human with the environment. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, movements related to environment inspired the fictional and nonfictional writings. In the first half of the 1990s, the emergence of Eco-criticism and its role could be witnessed in several disciplines, such as art and media. In the humanities, the sister disciplines of ecocriticism, such as anthropology and environmental philosophy have also focused on nature. The present paper provides an overall view of nature and its importance in *Silent Spring* while emphasizing on how the human beings treat it. It highlighted how the fertilizers were considered profitable during the 1950s, and no alternatives were adopted to stop their risks on nature.

It is Carson's book that brought forth the issues pertaining to the exploitation of nature and how future can be secured with awareness of what is happening around. Later, more people started to take initiatives to protect nature and make public aware about the dangers of chemicals. The literary pieces reflect on the environment and disasters that had happened over the years. These writings raise a fundamental question that how far a novel or a poem can change and make earth a better place to live.

Silent Spring has been divided into seventeen chapters which reflect on how environment is affected by the fertilizers. In the beginning of the first chapter, Carson mentions a town which is full of trees, fields, birds, animals and streams. She writes that everything was good so far; the flowers bloomed, fields had crops and birds sang until a strange danger crept over the area. Later, it was found that the reason after the sudden deaths of creatures was a poisonous

white powder which was found everywhere. Carson views that such town can be found in different counterparts of America and globally.

The book answers a question: what has silenced the songs and lyrical voices of the season of spring? The second chapter reflects on the history of human life where an interaction between the living and the nonliving was prevalent. Carson writes that chemicals are the “synthetic creations of man’s inventive mind”, which came into being after the advancements in technology. The purpose of humans’ engagement with the environmental issues gets manifested only when they remember that the fertilisers should not kill them along with the insects. Water is often considered an elixir, but when humans mix it with the chemical powders, they turn the potion into a poison. Carson, in the third chapter, mentions how these chemicals run through the meat of fish and milk of other animals.

The universal concern of pollution is discussed in the fourth chapter of *Silent Spring*. Carson writes that water plays an important role in human lives and it becomes our responsibility to conserve it. Soil is another element that Carson highlights in the fifth chapter. She considers it a harbinger of fertility and if we want to save nature, we should not pollute it. The sixth chapter of *Silent Spring* reflects on the greenery of trees which support the life of other creatures. Carson, in the seventh chapter, highlights how the fertilizers affect the ecology. It leads Carson (1962) to write that human beings add “a new kind of havoc” (p. 52) by killing creatures with these sprays.

Carson writes on how insects and birds are killed by the fertilizers in the eighth chapter. The chapter begins when the season of spring comes what Carson (1962) stated “unheralded” (p. 60) and the natural mornings are made silent that were full of bird songs. The animals and birds are regarded the safeguards of environment and human beings should join hands to save the natural world from these chemicals.

The ninth chapter deals with the important question in which Carson stated (1962), “when will the public become sufficiently aware of the facts to demand such action?” (p. 84). The actions matter because only they can turn the poisonous rivers of fertilizers into nectars. Carson discusses the consequences of these sprays on fields in the tenth chapter. In the eleventh chapter, she asks how government can protect us from these chemicals. Carson (1962) tries to provide answer by saying: “only to a limited extent” (p. 97).

The twelfth chapter reveals what great price human beings have to pay for the use of these fertilizers. Carson believes that they put an impact on our nervous system and give birth to several diseases. The thirteenth chapter also highlights the effects of pesticides on humans and other creatures.

How these chemicals cause cancer has been discussed in the fourteenth chapter. Carson asserts that humans need to change the philosophy of their life in relation to nature and they should admit that nature fights back. In the fifteenth chapter, she highlights that its only when humans treat the natural world with love that we can have flowers, fruits, and rains, otherwise, the nature would fight back. The question is can we become resistant to harmful fertilizers. In the sixteenth chapter, Carson (1962) tries to provide answer to it by saying

“spray as little as you possibly can” (p. 143). Human beings must aim at preserving nature so that all creatures can live together in harmony. The seventeenth chapter highlights the alarming situations that humans who have invented modern techniques to kill dangerous insects, can, in turn, kill them as well.

To conclude, it can be said that Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* is a testimony that a work of literature can raise the environmental consciousness. It inspires both the readers and the writers to work for the preservation of nature. Along with the discussion of the impact of fertilizers on nature, Carson’s book has also reflected on the symbiotic relationship of literature with environment. She combines the scientific approach with literature in order to reflect on what happens around. Undoubtedly, Carson has left us with a legacy that everyone should follow. We owe to her whatever we have achieved in the progress of movements related to environment. Literature truly serves as a powerful tool in raising the environmental consciousness by providing perspectives, insights and narratives that connect us to nature. It reminds us of our role in sustainable and ecological future.

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