

From Urban Greens to Ocean Blues: Biocentric Egalitarianism in Cottle's Environmental Narratives

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Abstract

This paper focuses on two picture books, namely *The Blue Giant* (2020) and *The Green Giant* (2019) by the same author, Kattie Cottle. She is an author and illustrator living in the United Kingdom. The author lays emphasis on issues like pollution of both water and air. The aim of the paper is to explore both the stories through the lens of biocentrism to discuss the portrayal of environmental relationships, agency, interconnectedness and the importance of green spaces in urban settings and remind that a moment of self-awareness regarding the extent of humanity's anthropocentric tendencies is essential as the lives of human beings are interconnected with that of nature.

Keywords: Kattie Cottle, pollution, environmental degradation, biocentrism and picture books

1. Introduction

Today's world is ravaged by severe environmental issues like climate change, global warming and pollution. Human beings are living a life that is rather disconnected from the natural environment. In an era where urbanisation has become very prominent, nature is given least importance. Increasing ecological concerns call for immediate action; while there is awareness about the impending doom, there is little immediacy in the actions to fix the wrongdoings on the part of human beings. The two chosen works are picture books that shed light on pollution; while *The Blue Giant* (2020) talks about pollution of water bodies, ocean in this case, *The Green Giant* (2019) talks about air pollution in an urban setting. Both the stories aim to bring to the readers' knowledge the grave importance of the impact of man's anthropocentric activities on nature.

2. Plot

The Blue Giant (2020) opens with a young girl Meera and her mother going to the ocean to spend some time on the beach. As they begin to settle down something unusual happens, the sea takes the form of a big giant startling them. The giant approaches the mother-daughter duo and in an earnest plea it asks them for their help. It says it has an important message from the

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ocean, “I have a message from the ocean. We really need your help!” (Cottle, 2020, p. 7). They both go into the ocean upon the giant’s request and are shocked to see huge amounts of garbage. The ocean is filled with all kinds of pollutants, plastic materials and other waste that the humans have dumped in the ocean. The author mentions how the other animals that do not live under water are also affected by the plastic debris. Dangers like ingestion, entanglement and smothering are some of the concerns that come to the reader's mind as they see the pictures depicted, for the giant itself is a mass of debris with pollutants like plastic materials such as water bottles, plastic bags and tins as evident through the pictures in the text. They both begin to clean the ocean, “helping each creature one by one” (Cottle, 2020, p. 13).

The author admits that it is a huge problem, thus collective effort is needed to fix it. The next day Meera goes to the beach to clean the shore, day after day and slowly people join her in groups, “She does and the next, it the next day, with her friends... and friends of friends” (Cottle, 2020, p. 21-22). The story ends on a note that with collective effort there is a possibility to make things right.

The Green Giant (2019) opens with a young girl, Bea Green and her dog, leaving the city to visit her grandfather in the country, “They’re going to see Grandad for a short summer holiday” (Cottle, 2019, p. 2). Her dog, Iris runs away making her chase after it, and Bea as a result, stumbles upon a greenhouse and is intrigued, “There are plants of all sizes, all shapes and all shades of green” (Cottle, 2019, p. 10) as she goes inside she hears rustling of leaves and strange noises. A gloomy shadow of a giant shows itself and waves in a friendly manner, “A giant, gloomy shadow looms on Bea” (Cottle, 2019, p. 13). It begins to narrate a story; it says it first germinated in the city and that all was well until the city became overly polluted and it became hard for it to breathe and it had to leave the city in order to survive, “But the city got more grey and it was hard to breathe. I had to leave” (Cottle, 2019, p. 18). Bea and the giant spent the entire summer together; when the time to depart approached, “And he gave her a present - a handful of sparkling seeds” (Cottle, 2019, p. 24). She went back to her city and planted them as she realised how gloomy everything looked, “Back in the city, Bea missed the giant and her gang of green friends. She noticed how grey everything seemed” (Cottle, 2019, p. 25). The story ends with the city slowly becoming green, “Perhaps one day soon the green giant will come back to visit the city” (Cottle, 2019, p. 31). This line emphasises the hope for a better future with restored environmental health.

3. Humanisation of Nature

In both the stories that have been chosen for analysis nature has been humanised. By portraying the degrading nature as giants, the author makes them seem human. The giants both exhibit almost human-like qualities when they seek the help of human beings in a desperate attempt to restore the depleting environment. The deteriorating ecological health is a result of the human beings’ growing greed and anthropogenic tendencies that prioritise material wealth over environmental wellbeing. Human beings have urbanised nature over the centuries for their own selfish benefits. The presence of growing industries and the increased use of vehicles have resulted in severe air pollution. In the second picture book, nature personified as giant leaves the city because it claims it had become hard to breathe. “But the city got more grey and it was hard to breathe. I had to leave”(Cottle, 2019, p. 18). This poignant narrative reflects the harsh

reality of our world, suggesting that if current practices persist, nature itself may face complete destruction. In the first picture book, the ocean is personified, the giant's plea imitates the human quality of despair at the time of crisis.

4. Biocentric Egalitarianism

In his work, *The Theory of Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (2011)

Paul Taylor talks about the intrinsic value of all life forms regardless of their use to human beings. He lays emphasis on interconnectedness of nature and human beings and asks his readers to adapt a biocentric outlook on life:

I call this world view "the biocentric outlook on nature." When one conceives of oneself, one's relation to other living things, and the whole set of natural ecosystems on our planet in terms of this outlook, one identifies oneself as a member of the Earth's Community of Life. This does not entail a denial of one's personhood. Rather, it is a way of understanding one's true self to include one's biological nature as well as one's personhood. From the perspective of the biocentric outlook, one sees one's membership in the Earth's Community of Life as providing a common bond with all the different species of animals and plants that have evolved over the ages. (Taylor, 2011, p. 44)

Biocentric egalitarianism offers a framework for tackling inequalities in the treatment of various beings within urban environments, advocating for practices that safeguard the interests of both human and non-human entities. Human beings in their eagerness to gain profits and material wealth have disregarded the well being of nature. They have failed to realise that destruction of nature means destruction of all life forms, including humans. Thus Taylor's suggestion to adapt a biocentric outlook might actually help:

Each is seen to be a teleological (goal-oriented) center of life, pursuing its own good in its own unique way. This, of course, does not mean that they all seek their good as a conscious end or purpose, the realization of which is their intended aim. Consciousness may not be present at all, and even when it is present the organism need not be thought of as intentionally taking steps to achieve goals it sets for itself. Rather, a living thing is conceived as a unified system of organized activity, the constant tendency of which is to preserve its existence by protecting and promoting its well-being. (Taylor, 2011, p. 45)

All living beings are fundamentally driven to preserve and enhance their well-being, regardless of their conscious awareness of this motivation. This idea emphasises the intrinsic value and purpose inherent in every organism, existing independently of human perception or interpretation.

This outlook rejects the notion that humans are superior to nature, recognising the intrinsic worth of all beings bordering on the principles of biocentrism:

Humans are not thought of as carrying on a higher grade of existence when compared with the so-called "lower" orders of life. The biocentric outlook precludes a hierarchical view of nature. To accept that outlook and view the living world in its terms is to commit oneself to the principle of species impartiality. No bias in favor of some over others is acceptable. (Taylor,

2011, p. 45)

Thus human beings must be mindful of the non-human species. Only when human beings as moral agents realise their duty towards preserving other life forms will their destructive ways stop. In the picture books, plastic pollution and air pollution are discussed in this light:

Our survival also requires that we maintain a certain ecological balance in our relations with other living things. It is a basic fact of the human condition that we are biologically dependent upon a sound, stable order in the Earth's natural ecosystems. We share this aspect of reality with all nonhuman species. (Taylor, 2011, p. 48)

5. Intrinsic Value and Ethical Attitude

While it is true that human beings must accept the inherent value of non-human species like plants, animals and other organisms to adapt a biocentric outlook, it is true that this attitude is also moral. Just like one will treat another person with respect and as an equal, Taylor states that non-human species too must be valued and treated with respect in his work. This attitude is necessary more than ever in an urban setting:

While human ethics has to do with the moral relations holding among human beings themselves and environmental ethics with the moral relations between humans and the natural world, the ethics of the bioculture is concerned with the human treatment of animals and plants in artificially created environments that are completely under human control. (Taylor, 2011, p. 53)

In the first picture book, *The Blue Giant* (2020), marine species and wildlife suffer greatly because of water pollution, "Ocean gyres are particular hotspots of plastic waste accumulation. Both macro plastics and micro plastics pose a risk to organisms in the natural environment, for example, through ingestion or entanglement in the plastic" (Barcelo, 2016, p. 333).

The ocean is home to a myriad of species and the natural habitat of those animals is ruined. Human beings must understand the extent of their role in causing damage to earth and its species. Thus, it is crucial to be ethical when it comes to treatment of plants and animals. Humans as moral agents must protect all life forms as they have a duty towards preserving nature, for this they must understand and accept that every being has a good of its own and respect nature:

For the theory of respect for nature only assumes that animals are beings to which it is correct to apply the objective concept of entity-having-a-good-of-its-own. It is, indeed, one of the fundamental principles of the theory that all animals, however dissimilar to humans they may be, are beings that have a good of their own. ... equally fundamental, is that all plants are likewise beings that have a good of their own. (Taylor, 2011, p. 66)

In the man-made and controlled environments, plants and animals face much destruction at the hands of human beings:

The social institutions and practices of the bioculture are, first and foremost, exercises of absolute, unconditioned power. They are examples of the way humans "conquer" and "subdue" nature. (Taylor, 2011, p. 55)

As stated earlier, human beings exercise power over nature in the anthropogenic biome. However there is a need to understand that just because humans have access to nature and natural spaces, they should not take advantage of it, “That we have power over living things does not give us license to do what we wish with that power” (Taylor, 2011, p. 55).

6. Urban Spaces

In the Foreword of the book *Ecocities: Rebuilding Cities in Balance with Nature* (2006) by Richard Register, Hazel Henderson talks about the extent of negative effects of urbanisation on the environment. He mentions how human beings have overexploited nature with the increased use of carbon dioxide emitting vehicles, cars in this case which has led to ecological concerns like air pollution. Register, in his introduction to this same work writes “CITIES ARE BY FAR THE LARGEST CREATIONS of humanity. Designing, building, and operating them has the greatest destructive impact on nature of any human activity” (Register, 2006, p. 1).

In *The Green Giant* (2019), the giant leaves the city for this very reason. Human beings built roads, buildings and factories where plants and other organisms thrived, as a result there were significant changes in the environment. The pollutants from factories and vehicles contaminated the once clean, fresh air. The green giant, here a personification of nature is unable to breathe in this new, toxic and gloomy city:

We have overshot the optimum in cars, suburbs, and sprawl and their attendant patterns of energy waste, pollution, and environmental destruction. We have overshot the mark in losing community and identity among thousands of acres of huge tract homes in former family farms — with even more demand for more roads, concrete, parking lots, and strip malls. (Register, 2006, p. xvi)

The above-mentioned lines throw light on how the lands are conquered and made urban spaces indicating the devastating loss of acres of natural spaces. While this generation of adults have already contributed to the aforementioned damages, it must also be noted that the upcoming generations turn a blind eye to these problems as well. “Children in today's typical car-dominated cities learn that cars are valued so highly that it is worth risking human life and enduring high costs and serious pollution to make way for them. They also learn that people don't care much for public life or nature” (Register, 2006, p. 6).

In *Social Justice and the City* (2009) the author talks about the impact of evolution of the urban system on nature in the long run,

The evolution of the urban system, whether we like it or not, can lead to large scale sensory deprivation with respect to certain phenomena (such as clean air, wilderness, etc.) and overexposure to others (such as suburban vistas, air pollution, etc.). In the long run, therefore, we must evaluate decisions about the growth of the city against a set of overriding cultural values which we wish to preserve or augment. (Harvey, 2009, p. 85)

In the first picture book, the main environmental issue is the contamination of ocean water by the plastic debris:

Due to its resistance to degradation, most plastic debris will persist in the environment for

centuries and may be transported far from its source, including great distances out to sea. Land- and ocean-based sources are the major sources of plastic entering the environment, with domestic, industrial and fishing activities being the most important contributors. (Barcelo, 2016, p. 333)

Plastic remains as it is known will take ages to degrade and it remains in the depths of the ocean for even centuries if it is not removed, “The increasing global production and use of plastics has led to an accumulation of enormous amounts of plastic litter in the world’s oceans” (Andrady, 2015, p. 57) and the presence of those pollutants affect marine life as evident through the story conveyed in the picture book, “Their ingestion by marine organisms provides a credible pathway to transfer the environmental pollutants dissolved in water into the marine food web” (Andrady, 2015, p. 67).

Human beings have become detached from nature forgetting their interconnectedness with nature, hence it is important to re-establish their connection with nature in any possible means. At a time when the world has become an anthropogenic biome, it is needed more than ever to do so. Supporting sustainable practices for example can be considered the first step. In a city where little to no importance is given to nature, one can start by making an individual effort like planting trees, “Other important elements of urban vegetation include lawns, gardens, and street trees. Each contributes in some way to ecosystem processes, land valuation, aesthetics, and sense of well-being” (Dunn & Heneghan, 2011, p. 108). Just like Bea Green did in the picture book “She looked at her present and sprinkled the seeds” (Cottle, 2019, p. 26). She contributed to making the grey city green.

7. What Could Be Done?

In the Preface to his work titled *Biophilic Cities: Integrating Nature into Urban Design and Planning* (2011), Timothy Beatly writes about the negative effects of urbanisation in many places across the globe mentioning the problems like smog and overpopulation that is prevalent in most developing cities:

In Mumbai, for instance, population growth and urban expansion have virtually eliminated the diverse system of mangroves that protected that urban estuary from floods. In other megacities, such as Mexico City, smog and air pollution take priority on the environmental agenda. (Beatly, 2011, p. xii)

In this work he discusses the building of what he calls biophilic cities emphasising the need to incorporate nature into the urban planning of cities, for the human beings have conveniently forgotten the significance of living as one with nature. Beatly draws on multiple examples from around the world “tentatively defining what a biophilic city is and what it might look and feel like” (Wilson, 2011, p. xi) He opines that in such a city nature will be in abundance and the residents of it will look for chances to repair and restore the depleting nature in an anthropogenic biome:

A biophilic city is a city abundant with nature, a city that looks for opportunities to repair and restore and creatively insert nature wherever it can. It is an outdoor city, a physically active city, in which residents spend time enjoying the biological magic and wonder around them. In

biophilic cities, residents care about nature and work on its behalf locally and globally. (Beatley, 2011, p. 2)

In the Foreword to this work, Edward O. Wilson also mentions the psychological benefits of doing so, “The evidence is compelling that frequent exposure to the natural world improves mental health, it offers a deep sense of inner peace, and, in many ways we have only begun to understand by scientific reason, it improves the quality of life” (Wilson, 2011, p. xv). Studies have shown improved mental and physical wellbeing of human beings in a greener environment,

Evidence suggests that the presence of green neighborhoods has broader and more pervasive impacts on health than we sometimes appreciate. (Beatley, 2011, p. 6)

It must be noted that living in a place that is surrounded by nature, interacting with and spending time in green spaces have improved the mental wellbeing of the residents. Thus engaging in eco friendly activities, environmental restoration practices as an effort to re-establish their lost connection with nature and reflect on their past anthropogenic actions by developing environmental stewardship, in a period when people disregard the ecological well being, environmental apathy can be overcome as suggested by Beatley:

The nature around us, and the personal engagement with that nature, actually helps us, then, to become better environmentalists and citizens. If we are concerned about how to overcome the environmental apathy of our times, at both global and local scales, there can be no better way to do it than to ensure that urbanites are immersed in nature and actively involved in its restoration and stewardship. (Beatley, 2011, p. 9-10)

As put forth by the author in the concluding thoughts of the introductory chapter of the same work, people must understand that they are a part of nature and that nature is essential to them. Thereby stopping their selfish ways in urbanising the natural spaces. It is important to realise that the idea of integrating nature in the urban designs is crucial for the mental and physical of both human and non-human species:

Biophilia suggests that there is an evolutionary and biological need for contact with nature, even when we have become very clever at believing we can live without it. Nature in our lives is not optional but essential. We need it for our emotional health and well-being, and we need it for planetary health ... delights, relaxes, soothes, replenishes, inspires, and uplifts us in our daily urban lives. It is all around us, and we live in it. (Beatley, 2011, p. 16)

Thus it is not a place, but a surrounding condition. In incorporating nature anywhere possible, setting up terrace gardens is one of the most efficient ways in contributing to green spaces in an urban environment:

A visit to the Green Roofs Research Center, in Malmö, Sweden, shows the extent of possibilities—here they have planted and monitored hundreds of green roof test plots, testing different plant and soil combinations. Some of these plots are for so-called brown rooftops—places in the urban environments (there are many) where plants can be used to restore and even take up pollutants in highly contaminated and degraded settings. (Beatley, 2011, p. 21)

As apparent from the earlier statements, there is no refined definition of what a biophilic city is, but the idea of what it would feel like is very clear. These cities will prioritise nature in every way possible and battle the causes of degradation while cherishing the parts of nature that already exist to restore ecological health. Greenery can be incorporated into homes and other spaces through small initiatives that make big impacts in the long run. These initiatives not only contribute to incorporating green corners in urban islands, but also aid in restoring the depleting ecological health:

A biophilic city is at its heart a biodiverse city, a city full of nature, a place where in the normal course of work and play and life residents feel, see, and experience rich nature—plants, trees, animals. The nature is both large and small—from treetop lichens, invertebrates, and even microorganisms to larger natural features and ecosystems that define a city and give it its character and feel. Biophilic cities cherish what already exists (and there is much, as we have already seen) but also work hard to restore and repair what has been lost or degraded and to integrate new forms of nature into the design of every new structure or built project. (Beatley, 2011, p. 45)

In the second picture book, *Bea*, the little girl does just that. She misses her green gang of friends after leaving the country to return home, however she makes an effort to change her surroundings. She cultivates new plants in the city to integrate nature into her living environment as the city she lived in lacked any greenery as evident through the words and pictures in the book, “Ecosystem services are often bundled, and a specific patch of urban vegetation may simultaneously contribute to reduced air pollution, reduced noise, and improved general perception of health, and are of importance in reducing impacts related to climate change” (Elmqvist, 2011, p. 238). As a result of her actions, the buildings surrounding her overflow with greenery from all sides as depicted at the end of the story, “Ecological engineering plays a critical role in the restoration of ecosystems that have been substantially disturbed by human activities such as environmental pollution or land disturbance” (Colding, 2011, p. 234).

The city is described as grey and gloomy and it looks very much so in the beginning, without a pinch of colour. However, her grand dad’s home is the exact opposite of her home, it is full of colour, the place itself overflows with various plants and flowers depicting a place that is full of life. It must be noted that her “Grandad loves his garden. He loves to sow and to water, to weed and to mow” (Cottle, 2019, p. 3). This is an evident contrast to Bea herself as “She loves to do nothing” (Cottle, 2019, p. 4). These statements describe the attitudes of two sets of people whose practices are completely different. Bea as a resident of the urban city is not interested in activities like gardening that improve the environmental health, which could be seen as a collective attitude of all residents of the urbanised city resulting in a city devoid of any greenery, on the other hand her grand dad’s attitude is eco-friendly. Thus, there is a complete contradiction in their living environments:

The love of and care for nature, the core value in biophilic cities, extends even beyond its borders to take steps and programs and actions that help to defend and steward over nature in other parts of the globe. And the green elements of cities serve many other important functions—they retain stormwater, sequester carbon, cool the urban environment, and

moderate the impacts of air pollution, for example. (Beatley, 2011, p. 46)

It also serves other purposes like retaining stormwater, cooling the urban environment and controlling the effects of pollutants by absorbing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as mentioned above. Thus in the concluding thoughts of this work, the author re-emphasises his idea on living as one with nature as follows, “There is a remarkable amount of nature in and around cities, and in addition to creating more environmentally sustainable urban areas it can and should serve as the foundation for deeper, more meaningful lives—lives lived in closer connection with nature and with each other” (Beatley, 2011, p. 151).

In the work *Urban Ecology: Patterns, Processes, and Applications* (2011) edited by Jari Niemelä, Thomas Elmqvist in the section titled “Ecosystem, Ecosystem Services and Social Systems in Urban Landscapes” writes about the loss of ecosystem in the urbanised world:

Urban planning has traditionally meant planning ‘for development’ and recently shifted more towards ‘sustainable development’. However, even such planning often ignores ecosystems and the natural configuration of the land. As a consequence, ecosystems are rapidly becoming fragmented, transformed, or entirely lost, causing loss of ecosystem services, such as impoverishing water and air quality. (Elmqvist, 2011, p. 192)

As a result of this continued unmindfulness through exploitation of green spaces for urbanisation through various acts of violence against nature and forest covers, nature becomes less vulnerable to calamities like flooding and extreme heat waves and human made environmental disturbances like pollution.

8. Conclusion

Thus the importance of following the above suggested practices like integrating natural ways in urban designing and buildings, adapting a more sustainable way of living through construction of biophilic cities while keeping in mind the interconnectedness of nature and all living organisms is explored in this paper. It also emphasises that one must adapt an attitude of respect for nature by protecting non-human species like marine animals in an anthropogenic biome with reference to the chosen picture books. While following the aforementioned ways is significant to bring about a change, government interference is also equally needed:

Adaptive governance has to merge with developments in urban planning such as smart growth and green infrastructure planning. Policy-makers, urban designers, and planners need to facilitate to a larger extent more experimental designs in cities, and gain from insights on adaptive co-management of ecosystems and lessons provided from sustainable natural resource management, to increase the potential for adaptive learning and avoid the vulnerability traps during the process of urban redevelopment.

Human beings are aware of the triple Rs, in an article titled “Zero Waste: A Key Move towards a Sustainable Society” Paul Connett opines:

The Fourth R of Responsibility, which holds the key to sustainability. We need individual responsibility, community responsibility, industrial responsibility, professional responsibility and political responsibility. We need community responsibility at the back end of the problem,

industrial responsibility at the front end, and we need good political leadership to bring these two together.

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