

THE REPRESENTATION OF PLANTS IN CHILDREN'S FANTASY LITERATURE- A PHYTOCRITICAL STUDY OF *HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE* AND *HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS*

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ABSTRACT

Phytocriticism explores various ways in which plants are represented in literary works. A phytocritical analysis focuses on similarities and differences between real and fictional plants, plants' narrative roles in plots or settings, their usefulness to human and animal characters, and so on. Children's fantasy novels often depict magical plants, which ignite their imagination. In fact, fantasy novels can provide alternate discursive spaces for plants and help defy prejudices against them, which is also a key function of phytocriticism. The imaginative rendering of human-like plants can help foster empathy in children. A Phytocritical approach to teaching-learning literature can develop children's plant awareness. The following paper aims to study two selected texts from the Harry Potter series by J.K Rowling- Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone and Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets using the ideas of phytocriticism. It will try to examine some aesthetic, cultural as well as botanical aspects of plant representation in the texts under scrutiny. It will evaluate anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches towards plants in the texts. It will attempt to analyse plants in the two novels using the phytoanalysis map developed by plant studies theorists. Through the map, it will examine general points like plant body, plant agency and plant symbolism.

KEYWORDS: *Phytocriticism, Children's Literature, Fantasy, Anthropomorphism, Ecocentrism, Anthropocentrism*

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Aristotelian times, plants have been classified as inferior to animals and humans. This justifies their undervaluation as objects of use rather than their acceptance as living beings in their own right. Such a tendency to look at the world from a human perspective is called anthropocentrism. But in recent times, Ecocritical studies have urged us to acknowledge considerations of the ecology as a whole, made up of all living and nonliving elements, be it species of flora and fauna or elements like land and water. It does so to highlight interconnections among all living entities and their habitats. This approach is called ecocentrism. Most of the studies of ecocriticism have focused on animals, or relationships between animals and humans. They also bring to light the relationship between humans and their natural environments in general. These studies have overlooked the considerations of plants as focal points. To overcome this lacunae, ecocriticism has evolved into a subcategory called Phytocriticism.

Phytocriticism particularly explores intersections between botany and literature and focuses on the representation of plants in literature in their botanical, aesthetic, mythological and instrumental contexts. It seeks to envision a different

existence for plants which is more agentic, individualised, based on their intrinsic planthood and deserving of value and understanding. It consequently also criticises the dominant worldview which marginalises plants, reducing them to resources or aesthetic backdrops. Speaking of Phytocriticism, John Charles Ryan writes, “it emphasises the agencies of botanical beings in poetic texts and considers how plants are rendered, evoked, mediated, or brought to life in and through language” (14). It refers to the idea of what Ryan calls phytophenomenology, or the botanical-being-in-the-world. Plants in fantasy texts also show the same traits of agency and personhood that recent advances in neurobotany suggest plants may possibly possess.

PLANT RHETORICS IN CHILDREN’S FANTASY LITERATURE

Literature has an abundance of magical plants, often drawing on fantastic and mythological elements- ‘The Jack and the Beanstalk’, a fairy tale, for instance, depicts a magical plant with a swift growth spurt.. Forests also form important literary landscapes in fantasy and fairy tales. They symbolise an alien space, throbbing with fearful as well as exciting possibilities. Triffids in John Wyndham’s work are monstrous, sentient plants. While it may seem counterintuitive to understand plants better through magic and fantasy, there is a distinct link between the aims of phytocriticism and children’s fantasy literature. Children often live on the cusp of reality, creating worlds and characters for themselves. Fantasy works fulfil their desire for romance and creativity. Fantasy “depicts a reality which is radically different in its nature and functioning from the world of our ordinary experience.” (Abrahms, 355) It depicts plants as different from the way they are usually conceived of. Phytocriticism also asks us to reevaluate and alter the way we look at plants. Children’s literature in particular has a scope for transgressing the limits of reality and can be instrumental to symbolically explore such an alternate way. It fosters in children empathy for plants, which is another term for moral imagination (the ability to imagine themselves in plants’ situations). This is sometimes achieved through the anthropomorphizing of plants in children’s books. For example, Ents in JRR Tolkien’s series *Lord of the Rings*. This enables children to relate to them like with humans, and hence acknowledge their individual existence.

Children are more susceptible to change, and accept different points of view readily as well, hence fantasy texts directed at children can have a deep impact on them. Children’s fantasy texts are more than just escapes from reality. They can also be an entry into a world where the mind can be opened up to several possibilities that reality limits. As Victoria Flanagan states in her article “Children’s Fantasy Literature: Why Escaping Reality is Good for Kids”, “Fantasy is a genre that has much to offer to young readers. One of the most compelling reasons for giving children fantasy is that it comments on social reality through indirections (metaphor, allegory, parable) and can therefore deal with complex questions in a more playful and exaggerated manner.” Just as with social realities, children’s fantasy novels also have the potential to comment on and inform them of ecological realities. Through magical plants, these texts sometimes suggest evolved ways of approaching plants. For instance, plants are depicted as grotesque in fantasy literature- as mixtures of plant, animal and human features. This allows a posthuman blurring of species boundaries, and makes children think of interconnections or continuities among the plant and human or animal species. This also imaginatively resonates with the phytocritical idea of vegetal intercorporeality, or corporeal kindredness and continuity between plants, animals and humans. Another instance of relevance of fantasy to phytocritical aims is the depiction of plants as marvellous, terrifying or awe inspiring. Plants are usually dismissed as sessile and dull. Phytocriticism explores plants from a different perspective- as leading dramatic lives - rife with conflict owing to their growth, competing for resources like sun and water. In this vein, John Charles Ryan gives the example of the Mulberry bush, which is capable of extraordinary feats of projectile motion. The tools of phytoanalysis

are necessary to parse out plant oriented meanings from the relevant texts. Such tools include aspects like plant body, plant script, plant voice and plant environment. It is also important to note that children's literature can be enjoyed and interpreted by adults as well, a case in point is J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series which enjoys a wide readership across different age groups.

THE REPRESENTATION OF PLANTS IN HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE AND HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

Plants play various roles in the selected novels, as villainous deterrents to the protagonists' adventures, as cures to their life threatening diseases, as raw materials for magical artefacts like wands and flying brooms, and also as companions, sources of horror or objects of knowledge. Whereas the first part of the series (Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone) focuses on Harry's entry into the wizarding world and his first encounter with a dark wizard in the Forbidden Forest, the second part (Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets) explores his continued adventures in a secret chamber where a mythical basilisk terrorises the wizarding community. Along with faraway castles, flying brooms, curses and magic spells, the books are filled with fantastic and grotesque creatures which have fascinated children through decades. Just as mythical animals like winged dragons, centaurs and mermaids are points of fascination in the book, magical plants are deserving of attention too. An overall ecological awareness is seen in these texts, through subjects like Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology, the magical equivalents of zoology and botany respectively. Although plants occupy the margins or silent backdrops of human activities, they are crucial to our survival. They are key elements of the Wizarding World as well, reflecting their significance in the real world. Wands, the equipment with which the characters wield magic, are said to be crafted with wood made of trees in the Forbidden Forest. Wands are instances of non antagonistic interactions between humans and plants, where the wizard and the wand act in complementarity to perform magic. This subverts the idea of humans exploiting plants to their own ends. In general, plants' representation in Harry Potter books can be traced to the age-old connection between witchcraft and plants.

Hogwarts, the school castle, has several greenhouses on its grounds. It educates students about the medicinal uses of magical plants, their morphological features, ways to tend to them as well as safety precautions while dealing with the more dangerous plants. Professor Sprout, the Herbology teacher, is described as having soiled hands and clothes from the time spent tending to plants. She exemplifies a caring human-plant relationship. The students are required to know more about plants by observing them and interacting with them. This depiction of plant study can encourage young readers to explore plants as well. It would help respond constructively to plant blindness, a human tendency to ignore plants and the contribution they make. (Wandersee and Schlusser, 1999) Children often like to emulate what fascinates them, instead of what has been forced upon them, and may take joy in acting like the characters they idealise. Plant information is given out in accurate detail for the Herbology classes. For example Devil's Snare is a plant which is said to prefer growing in dark, damp places. There is a real poisonous plant named Devil's Snare, which belongs to the nightshade family. Rowling has used actual botanical features to provide a kind of authenticity to her representation of the Devil's Snare.

In Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, the protagonist Harry visits his friend's house named 'The Burrow'. It is surrounded by a huge overgrown garden, described in evocative detail. Garden gnomes, a kind of magical creature, find their abode due to the thickset plants. These plants offer them shy creatures hiding spaces, and a habitat in general. Similarly, the Forbidden Forest on the edge of the Hogwarts school grounds offers a safe haven for many mythical

creatures like centaurs, unicorns and giant spiders. These examples explore ways in which plants and tree covers form an indispensable part of the ecosystem, nourishing life for many animals. A fruitful Plant-animal interaction is shown through such instances.

Plants are also treated as individual beings. They are said to possess personhood. This is in light of the phytocritic Mathew Hall's urge to treat plants as persons, so as to foster plant-human kinship. (Hall, 2011) This idea falls under the category of philosophy of botany, which is particularly relevant to the study of fantastic texts. It calls for a recognition of plants as fellow living beings and not objects. It accords plants a sense of individuality which humans usually do not give to them. Plants have been thought of in homogenous terms, impersonally categorised in terms of their species according to the Linnaean paradigm, which fantasy asks to reconsider. Treating plants as persons would also encourage an ethics of care in the plant-human bond. One of the characters in the novels, Neville Longbottom, is very fond of plants. A shy kid, he finds respite in the company of plants, trying to understand and study them as well.

Plants are characters in themselves in the novels under scrutiny. The Whomping Willow defies the stereotype about plants as dull and stationary. Its branches are sentient, and they respond to stimuli of touch. It is an instance of an agentic plant, which thrashes at anyone who harms it. In Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Harry and Ron accidentally crash their car on its surface. It swings its branches around like several arms and fights back defensively as it were. A magical spirit seems to be infused within the plant. Similarly, the Devil's Snare acts as a deterrent on the way to a room which hides the philosophical stone. It attacks Harry and his friends by curling its long and thick tendrils around their bodies and trying to strangle them. Just as the Whomping Willow is sensitive to the stimuli of touch, the Devil's Snare is sensitive to light. It recoils under exposure to light, a fact which Hermione remembers having learnt and saves herself and her friends with. This reinforces among children the value of paying attention to plants' features.

It is not just the spirit or personhood of plants that has been shown in representing magical plants, but also the vibrant materiality and physicality of plants. The way in which plant tendrils curl represents actual corporeal articulations, rather than romanticised, anthropomorphic descriptions of plant movements. The problem with anthropomorphism or personification of plants in culture and literature is that it overlooks the unique material existence of plants as species distinct from human beings. (Michael Marder) It simply projects human attributes onto the plants, reinforcing an anthropocentric perspective. However, the device can be strategically used to foster empathy in children. This can be seen in the example of Mandrakes. They are plants with roots looking like human babies –described as ‘a small, muddy, extremely ugly baby’, ‘bawls at the top of the lungs’, has ‘pale, green skin’ and leaves growing ‘right out of his head’. These babies shriek when uprooted. This is a rare instance of plant voice, resisting its uprooting from a preferred environment. Most of the plants in the texts are silent, and interact with their environment through physical motions just as in reality. The Mandrakes' screams are said to be very harmful for wizards, even fatal. These plants are tended to with great care. For instance, Professor Sprout covers them with scarves during winter. She also tends to the wounded branches of the Whomping Willow with bandages. The mandrakes are described as moody and secretive when they grow up, traits which mirror human adolescence. Such descriptions help children identify with trees. The mandrakes are tended to until their maturity and then used for preparing a medicine to cure a particular curse. They are chopped and stewed into a restorative draught to bring back to life humans and animals which have been turned to stone or ‘petrified’. Whereas their agency and individuality is explored in the beginning, ultimately their voice is silenced just as in the case of real life plants. They meet their fate as an object of human and animal consumption. By depicting them as human babies who grow until

maturity, a more intimate kinship is developed between the mandrakes and children who come to care for them as they read. This makes their sacrifice all the more pitiable.

Plants are also explored as a part of the environment in Harry Potter. The Forbidden Forest, for instance, forms the landmark of Hogwarts grounds. It is a place to project human anxieties about the wilderness. It is described as a dark, dreary place, which inspires feelings of claustrophobia and being watched in the characters. It even evokes ideas of evil. Through its negative descriptions, it deters children from freely exploring in the forest, which offers ample opportunities to understand the environment. In the first part of the series, a walk in the Forbidden Forest is a punishment meted out against misbehaving students or detention. In the second part of the series, the Forest is shown to hide a secret army of giant sized spiders which try to kill the two protagonists, Harry and Ron. The Forest embodies the romanticists' depiction of nature as reflecting human emotions and values. The same Forest, however, is also shown as a habitat for many creatures.

Plants have been influencing human culture and imagination for a long time. The Tree of Knowledge and the Forbidden Fruit, or the idea of a lotus growing from mud as a religious symbol of enlightenment explores the metaphoricity of trees in the human psyche. Many mythological tales also involve trees. For example, the Greek myth of Persephone and Hades involves a cursed pomegranate fruit. Harry Potter is a contemporary example of how plants have influenced human imagination. The plants depicted in the texts have been inspired from either real life plants or mythological plants which were believed to have potent magical powers in the past societies. This makes sense, since some mythical aspects of human imagination have been transferred in recent times in the fantasy genre. Mandrakes were considered as cursed plants, which brought forth doom on their uprooter. These plants have roots with forked bottom, and resemble a human. Aspects of folklore have been creatively used by Rowling to forge magical plants.

Plant horror is a fascinating aspect of children's fantasy books. As Dawn Keatley states, "Plant horror is a result of the imaginative possibility that repressed and oppressed plants will turn back on humans." Plants like The Whomping Willow and Devil's Snare are monstrous and powerful, they do not let themselves get victimised by humans as is often seen in the real world. They fight back if they are harmed, and also if they are approached wantonly against their 'wishes'. Fear in children's fantasy literature is one way of engaging them, making them involved in books. It gives them thrills, especially because of the aesthetic distance from the source of fear as well as the way in which the fear is resolved in texts. These plants look like real life plants, yet they somehow are unfamiliar as well, and the interplay of familiarity and strangeness in them makes them uncanny, a device commonly used in fantasy and gothic genres. This interplay between the sameness and difference of plants and humans or animals is explored by John Charles Ryan in his idea of vegetal dialectics. Vegetal dialectics occurs in fantasy texts where plants are made to resemble humans and yet they have morphologically distinct features of their own. This allows children to relate to plants on one level, and recognize them as distinct species on another.

CONCLUSIONS

Whereas in the Linnaean and Aristotelian paradigm plants were hierarchically considered as occupying the lowest stage of living beings or lacking individuality, recent developments in Literary Plant Studies and Phytocriticism call for a reappraisal of such marginalisation. Children's Fantasy novels like the Harry Potter series offer alternative discursive spaces for understanding plant lives and explore botanical agency through magical plants. The representation of plants in children's literature can be analysed through various 'phytoanalysis' parameters- whether the plant bodies are

phytomorphic (resembling real life plants) or anthropomorphic (resembling human bodies), whether plants are passive or influential and agentic, are focalizers or the focalized, and so on. (Lykke Guanio-Uluru) In the texts under scrutiny, an ambivalence of attitude towards plants, as far as the aforementioned factors are concerned, is seen. In some cases, they occupy an agentic position and drive their own lives, while in others they are reduced to sacrificial objects for enhancing the lives of animals and humans. Anthropocentric and ecocentric tendencies are both seen in the selected texts, complicating the vision of how plants are approached and described therein. In some cases the plant-human dichotomy of passive and active respectively has been overturned. All in all, applying Phytocriticism to the study of children's fantasy can be used to implicitly evolve attitudes about the much misunderstood plant kingdom, as well as make readers more invested in plant ethics.

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