

The Ecocritical Analysis of a Children's Picture Book:

The Walking Plane Tree

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I am coming from an era where children still climbed trees. It was fun to pick up poppies or mulberries for my mother who would prepare delicious jam with them. We saw goats and sheep and geese in the neighborhood right in the middle of İstanbul, in a small town by the Bosphorus called Beylerbeyi. We learned by experience that the geese do not like the color red and can attack you when they catch you wearing a red coat. We learned by experience that the fresh laid egg is warm and if you find one single egg in the morning you have to share half of your omelette with your brother. We learned by experience that you can make wreath out of daisies and feel like a princess.

So a few years ago in 2002, actually, when a friend's son saw a goat for the first time in his life and asked "Are the horns made of iron?" we didn't quite know whether to laugh or to cry but I remember going "tchk, tchk, tchk, ah poor new generation, what kind of a world will they inherit?"

Richard Louve in his book *Last Child in the Woods* describes this problem as nature deficit disorder and asserts that this disorder is growing among urban children who have not played in wild places and do not have an attachment to nature because they have no experience with nature.

4 more years later, just 1 and a half months ago, in September 2009, when 30 people lost their lives in the middle of İstanbul due to the flood that occurred as a result of abusive and greedy use of river basins for housing we felt deep agony for them and for our future. We may be considered lucky because in China, in 1998 in the Yangtze river basin 3700 people died and the economic loss was around 30 billion dollars.

Everywhere in the world the effects of global warming, deforestation, toxic waste disposal and pollution and other forms of environmental degradation make scientific, technological and ecological education more important than ever. With this need comes many questions and some of these questions are highlighted by Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nell.

- What sort of literature is appropriate for children?

- What responsibility do adults have to children to keep them informed about critical issues of the day such as global warming,terrorism,political corruption and corporate greed?
- At what point must an ideal of “protection” end and one of preparation begin?

Their *Tales for Little Rebels* address these questions (Mickenberg and Nell, 5) with concrete examples that could inspire the next generation to create a better future for everyone. That was an example from the U.S.

Coming back to Antalya-Turkey,where the international conference on *The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons* in November 4-6, 2009 was held and this paper was presented will focus on children’s book and ecology in general and one picture book-The Walking Plane Tree (Yürüyen Çınar) in particular. In order to have a historical perspective on ecology and children’s books a good reference source is Serpil Ural’s research called *Çocuk Kitaplarında Çevre-Environment in Children’s Books*.

Ural, points out that the first children’s book in the world on an ecological issue is dated 1899.It is published in England but the author and the illustrator are Australian.The book that treats the threat of extinction of the kangroos is called *Dot and the Kangroo* . The first picture book that treats the subject of environmental detoriation is an American book *The Little House* by Virginia Lee Burton published in 1942.No wonder both these books come from “new world” countries where technological progress is very rapid. These books can be called pioneer books and until 1960s we rarely see ecological problems in children’s books because after the second world war,countries are building new factories,new cities,in short they are busy trying to heal their injuries.

When the 1970’s come , especially in the second half of the seventies ,a prominent increase is noticed in chidren’s book with ecological themes worldwide and Turkey is no exception.The first examples are from Redhouse Press. The very first one was a translation from Alice and Rober Arndt – *Çevre ve Sen- The Environment and You* followed by local works, *Picking Up Flowers is Forbidden* by Can Göknil, *Pan and the Flower* by Fatih Erdoğan . Later we see foundations, municipalities,ministries getting involved in the subject , printing and distributing books.

Ural points out that it is possible to see both the didactic approach and the subtle literary approach in books written for children. Both the Turkish books and the books from the other countries have common characteristics and one of them is depicting the adults as the primary agent responsible for environment degradation and it's through the effort of the children that some measures can be taken. Often the animals and the plants help the children in this endeavour.

Today , books about the ecological concerns are still written and Hep Yeşilⁱ- Forever Green which tells the story of a green bottle that becomes a small glass christmas tree after being recycled, Kocaman Küçük Denizⁱⁱ(The Grand Little Sea) that treats the sea pollution problem, Yürüyen Çınar- The Walking Plane Tree may be recited as three of the current examples.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Walking Plane Tree is based on a true story. Before analysing the book ,we will go back in time to the year 1930 to a small town by the sea called Yalova to meet an extraordinary leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic. From the memoirs of Afet İnan, we learn that on 21st of August 1929 Atatürk and his team leave İstanbul on board of the Ertuğrul Yatch sailing towards Yalova.Reaching the Yalova landing port Atatürk noticed a very big plane tree.^{iv}He was very impressed and he ordered that they leave the yatch with a small boat and go and rest under the shade of that great plane tree.Later he ordered the land to be bought and a mansion be built near the tree. The order was carried out and a wooden two storey mansion was built the same year.Later an exemplary farm was established on this land that would be left after his death to the Turkish nation through the Ministry of Agriculture.

But how come this mansion of Yalova became known as the Walking Mansion of Yalova?

To understand that we have to go to June 1930 when Atatürk visits Yalova again.The gardener of the Yalova Mansion asks his permission to cut some branches of the great plane tree claiming that the branches were harming the windows as well as the roof.

Atatürk , asked that the tree would not be cut but instead the mansion would be moved. That is exactly what happened. The engineers,architects and the technicians of the İstanbul Municipality moved the mansion 4 meters and 80 centimeters on tram rails. The earth around the mansion was dug out carefully down to the level of the foundation and tracks were laid under the mansion.First , terrace section,then the main building were moved in three days and Atatürk himself was there all that time.(Please note that the pictures shown during presentation are retrieved from <http://www.yuruyenkosk.com/> and <http://www.arastirma-yalova.gov.tr/yk55/ykr55.htm>)

In 1930, there was no acid rain. The world did not think in terms of pollution, erosion, deforestation and deep ecological consciousness but here was a leader who moved a mansion not to harm a tree because in his own words he believed that “ Respect to nature is the conscience of the mind.”

Later, in 1996 one of the prominent thinkers of deep ecology Paul Shephard will say “ When the self is expanded to encompass the world, environmental destruction becomes self destruction.”^v

For many years this story of the plane tree was included in the school books however it was in 2009 that a picture book was created based on this true story for the first time.

Greta Gaard in her very comprehensive paper called “Toward an Ecopedagogy of Children’s Environmental Literature” has asked a fundamental question “When we read ,study and teach children’s environmental literature, what effect do we want to have on our children?” and here are a list of her answers:^{vi}

1. To have the capacity to analyze ecojustice problems in a holistic way so that these problems can actually be solved
2. To develop this problem solving capacity, and to nourish oneself through a lifetime of persistent action for social justice and environmental sustainability
3. To help develop a connected self identity, a connection with and a joy in nature and a connection across cultures.

Greta Gaard also underlines 3 important questions that we could ask to the text and the answers may show the confluence of ecopedagogy and environmental children’s literature. Let us take each question and apply it to the text, in order to see the full translated text of the Walking Plane Tree please see the appendix.

The first question suggested by Gaard is “How does the text address the ontological question “who am I” Is the human self identity constructed in relation or in opposition to nature, animals and diverse human cultures/identities? In other words, how does the narrative provide an antidote to the first step in the logic of domination?” (Gaard, 5)

This translation so far demonstrates that the writer sees nature as an agent that can act independently. The plane tree is aware that although Atatürk did not let the gardener cut the branches of the plane tree, there are now

people who disregard this legacy and cut trees. The environmental problem is posed as the cutting of the trees to build houses. There is also a subtle hint that Atatürk's legacy is being disrespected.

This fantastic story depicts the priority of the sentient beings as first the tree, second the children, third their parents and last the Lord Mayor and his team thus making a radical change in the order of things. Furthermore the daughter of the warden calls the tree as her best friend thus planting in the minds of the children a concept of equality and not one of dominance. The ontological question who am I is answered as I am a friend of a tree or in broader terms I am a friend of nature. The child is also reminded through the story of the Walking Mansion that Atatürk was also a great friend of nature. By doing this a bridge is built across generations and a legacy is passed on to the young generation. At the same time the young generation is empowered through this true story and they can look up to the founder leader and follow his walk instead of those politicians who do not practice their talk.

2. How does the narrative define the ecojustice problem? Does the narrative conclusion offer an appropriate strategy for responding to the problem posed in the story, rejecting hierarchy in favor of community and participatory democracy? Are the children left alone to solve ecojustice problems originally created by the adults? (Gaard, p.6)

The second question was "Did the narrative conclusion offer an appropriate strategy for responding to the ecological problem? Does the narrative conclusion offer an appropriate strategy for responding to the problem posed in the story, rejecting hierarchy in favor of community and participatory democracy? Are the children left alone to solve ecojustice problems originally created by the adults?"

As I have tried to show the children were supported by their parents. The parents used their democratic right of speaking and their right to strike. They firmly reminded the mayor and the board that in ecological affairs as well as in all the affairs that concern their well being they want to have a say and the children learned by watching their parents act. They realized that they are not powerless and together they can influence the decision makers to pay attention to the wish/say of the habitants.

Thinking about the prevailing culture nowadays, this suggestion may be considered a radical move but only a liberated, informed, questioning and activist child might create a different future ;a praying, redemption seeking,

obeying child can not and children's literature can encourage children to question authority as pointed out by Mickenberg and Nell.

Going back to Greta Gaard's third question, ". What kind of agency does the text recognize in nature? Is nature an object to be saved by the heroic child actor? Is nature a damsel in distress, an all sacrificing mother, or does nature have its own subjectivity and agency?"(Gaard,p.9) let's look at the agency situation. "Is nature an object to be saved by the heroic actor or is nature a damsel in distress or is it portrayed as an agent in its own right?"

This text portrays nature as a communicating and caring entity. The walking plane tree was informed by the birds about the threat in the forest. It started to walk to help the forest trees thus breaking a habit and making everyone notice. Its disappearance made everyone notice. It would be a pity if not an irrevocable disastrous mistake if we notice the big threat only when all the trees disappear, so in a sense The Walking Plane Tree is a symbol that reminds us that it is up to us not to destruct nature because in Sheppard's words "environmental destruction becomes self destruction or in Atatürk's words "respect to nature is the conscience of the mind."

This narrative text has the potential to operate on a number of levels or to put it differently with a good discussion leader may it be a parent or a teacher this narrative text is suitable to discuss different issues like a connection over generations and a legacy of nature protection, interdependence of sentient beings, ways of influencing decisions through democratic mechanisms, environmental issues and our responsibility for a better, nature respecting future. The text also has the subtle power to make the children proud of their roots through the real incident of Atatürk and the Walking Mansion of Yalova.

Before I conclude by evaluating The Walking Plane Tree written by Simla Sunay and illustrated by Sadi Güran as a valuable contribution to Turkish Children's literature I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the book is not printed on recycled paper and this is a criticism that should be noted. The publisher will only respect those values in the book if he joins the green press movement and publishes on recycled paper thus creating a message consistency in the minds of children.

In conclusion, I would like to recall my favorite historical personality after Atatürk, the Indian philosopher Mahatma Gandhi who said "If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children."

I think the same concept is also true for ecological peace and coexistence.

ⁱ Akyol,Defne Akşin,Hep Yeşil,Mavibulut Yayıncılık,2008

ⁱⁱ Bulut,S,Kocaman Küçük Deniz, Can Çocuk Yayınları,2008

ⁱⁱⁱ Sunay,S.,Yürüyen Çınar,Remzi Kitapevi, April 2009

^{iv} İnan,A.,Atatürk Hakkında Hatıralar ve Belgeler,T.İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları,July 2007,p377

^v Shepard,Paul.,Traces of an Omnivore,Washington ,DC:İsland Pres,1996,p.xv)

^{vi} Gard G, Green Theory and Praxis:The Journal of Ecopedagogy Volume 4,No.2 (2008),Towards an Ecopedagogy of Children's Environmental Literature, p 10-18