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The Human intrusion towards the balance of Nature in Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring*: A Review

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Abstract:

This paper revisits Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in order to show how seminal the work has been in the wake of the global concerns over the climate changes and environmental disaster in our times. Carson's focus was on the balance of nature and the web of life and she presented the horrible effects of the tremendous use of chemicals since World War II. She highlighted the impact and effects of DDT and chlorinated hydrocarbons to the world. Carson rightly marked that the chemicals are homicides rather than pesticides. Her work is celebrated worldwide because of her ability to foresee the future.

Keywords: Pesticides, nature, interdependence, balance, Environmentalism

“...man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself. The rains have become an instrument to bring down from the atmosphere the deadly products of atomic explosions. Water, which is probably our most important natural resource, is now used and re-used with incredible recklessness.” Rachel Carson¹

Introduction

Carson's *Silent Spring* brought out much-needed environmental consciousness following the excessive use of harmful chemicals like the DDT. But the book also invited adverse reactions from the people of the chemical industrialist and she had made long preparation to repel such attacks. Carson was employed with the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) from 1936-1952. She knew the practices and policies that existed in her time. She understood that government leaders and industry were interested in creating sweeping changes, but she wondered if they did know the implications of their decisions pertaining to environment and mankind. Carson created legacy through her *Silent Spring*.

In the late 1950's with the Industrial Revolution booming, the era was exposed to the use of chemicals especially farming and agriculture was quite indebted to it. With the increase in the desire to control the pests, there were increase in the pesticide manufacturers which thus lead to the birth of DDT and other lethal chemicals. But all was not well with the boon of these chemicals. Birdwatchers saw the decline of birds, there was no more bird songs as reported by Olga Huckins to the editor of Herald in 1958.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/10/05/reviews/carson-obit.html>

Huckins approached her acquaintance Rachel Carson, which thus led to the publication of *Silent Spring*, lending possible effects of these pesticides along with solutions, reaching public in simple terms.

The Aftermath of Chemicals:

In 1939, with the discovery that DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro-ethane) could kill insects by Paul Muller, thereby, began the full-fledged use of DDT. Insects can destroy crops and can spread disease organisms. Carson notes that managing the entire population is composed entirely of individuals of a single species, which is monoculture. When an insect pest enters monoculture, they easily travel from plant to plant, with the rate of spreading intensified as they reproduce. During an epidemic when a single mammal gets infected be it fauna or mankind the rate at which it can spread is easier but to find the causing agent of the disease and to halt it is quite impossible.

Another noted problem is the weeds another kind of pests. When humans tend, nurture the lawns, grasses, trees these pesticides in turn affect them and hence should be reduced. Thus Carson portrayed in her emotional language as “Elixirs of death”. DDT accumulates in the liver and fat tissues. If enough accumulated the organism can die. Thus it enters the chain causing harm. Biochemists later learned that DDT interferes with the cell’s processing system.

DDT is a complex compound and so organisms have no enzymes to digest it. It can therefore neither be digested nor can be excreted. It cannot be destroyed either. If it is present in excess the organism dies or when it is eaten by another predator it enters the food chain. The effects of small amounts of DDT become amplified in the environment. Thus Carson argues they should be called biocides rather than insecticides, noting they are poisons.

The Emergence of *Silent Spring*:

Carson’s *Silent Spring* aimed in taking away the public indifference and create a change. She brought out the global crisis the entire world is facing making people realise that it is a global cause rather than being separated by borders or territories. This formed the ground for the environmental writers to engender emotional responses as a means of coming to terms with local and global ecological crisis, as a result of which mankind can connect science, technology and nature.

Carson talks of how mankind outnumber nature and their intervention has caused these effects. She brings out the metaphor in her title. Spring is supposed to be full of life, rebirth to nature, birds singing, abundant of green life yet it’s full of huge losses. She blends in both bringing out the adverse effects in her title itself. She implies to say that the spring is no more the same and silent indicates death. Thus the blend of Silent and Spring.

Carson’s dispute about pesticides was both general and specific. She did not wish to stop pesticides but rather on the indiscriminate use of chemicals excessively. She didn’t just end with criticism but with affordable solutions as well. She spurred an understanding of nature to control nature. She advocated the use of natural chemicals and biological control. Carson concentrated on farmers as well suggesting them practical solutions. According to her pests control was solvable.

The writer urged the need for the farmers to understand nature first, in order to speculate nature. There is an urgency to respect the many interactions of nature. She suggests possible ways as to find plants that produced chemicals and have restrained insects in eating them. She suggests introducing insect predators, diseases or parasites the conditions under which they would thrive.

Carson emphasised the need and urgency for the mankind to view nature holistically. Thus by using rhetorical perspectives and her skilled talent, Carson interweaves nature to the mankind.

Carson also notes that it took many billion years for the entire earth to reach this state and that from time immemorial there has always been interaction between living and the environment. But among all the mammals Carson wonders at the audacity of human beings in trying to take control over nature. Publication of *Silent Spring* resulted in a request to President J.F. Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee to study the problem. The committee report criticized the federal government's eradication programs, such as those directed against the gypsy moth, fire ant, Japanese beetle, and white fringed beetle. It called for improved coordination between federal agencies, immediate reduction of the use of DDT with eventual elimination as a long-term goal, echoed concerns about persistent pesticides, and raised alarm about a general nonchalance for human safety.

The committee also called for expansion of research into specific controls, chronic effects, and synergism or potentiation of pesticide toxicity by commonly used drugs. The book rekindled emotions to an extent that mankind realised where it was at fault. Yet Carson did not live to see the fruit of her toil. "The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction" (Carson 15).

Carson did what few authors have been able to do, she tied the diverse facets of information about pesticide abuse and exposure, biological magnification, and environmental impact into one story that was eminently readable and understandable by a general public not steeped in science. The first chapter, "A Fable for Tomorrow," much-criticized because it was a fictional account resembling a Gothic tale, tells of a town where "all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings" (Carson 9).

The description of the blight and its effects gripped the reader in a way that no cold, calculated recitation of fact could. The unfolding of omnipresent danger compels attention to the message. When she wrote *Silent Spring*, Carson had no illusions about what the book could accomplish. When the manuscript was almost finished, she wrote to a close friend, "It would be unrealistic to believe that one book could bring a complete change" (Brooks 72). She herself failed to anticipate the enormous and enduring impact of *Silent Spring*.

Carson believed that the aim of science is to discover and illuminate truth. But, she says, there can be no separate literature of science, be it fiction, history or biography which ultimately is the aim of literature, according to her. There were many attacks on her and her sensational book too. There were scientists who attacked that the book to be considered as mere science fiction. Dr. Robert White-Stevens, a spokesman for the industry, said:

"The major claims of Miss Rachel Carson's book, 'Silent Spring,' are gross distortions of the actual facts, completely unsupported by scientific, experimental evidence, and general practical experience in the field. Her suggestion that pesticides are in fact biocides destroying all life is obviously absurd in the light of the fact that without selective biologicals these compounds would be completely useless.

The real threat, then, to the survival of man is not chemical but biological, in the shape of hordes of insects that can denude our forests, sweep over our crop lands, ravage our food

supply and leave in their wake a train of destitution and hunger, conveying to an undernourished population the major diseases scourges of mankind.”²

In fact, Carson was a lone fighter against the big establishment. Of course, many individuals supported her. But she had to fight the war calmly. She said:

“We must have insect control. I do not favor turning nature over to insects. I favor the sparing, selective and intelligent use of chemicals. It is the indiscriminate, blanket spraying that I oppose.”³

Many critics consider science to be devoid of emotional, sensational issues and objectivity. Carson herself was a science fiction writer. Her writings testify the superficiality of the two cultures theme articulated by C.P Snow. It was all about “cultural interchange” between science and literature.

Carson is noted for her science nonfiction literature for which she was neglected. Science fiction was not merely the substitute for science but also paved for the development of myths. Myths are not to be looked upon as superstitions or as of that can be proved false by science. It should be viewed as a collection of narratives reaching beyond the boundaries of knowledge. They seem to touch the heart of society’s emotional, spiritual and intellectual consciousness. Even for science myths can have a formative effect, working below the level of objective consciousness as unconscious or semiconscious influences. Carson’s *Silent Spring* also employs this force in the opening chapter. As myths have a narrative structure to invoke a myth within an argument, a writer must therefore tell a story and Carson excelled in the art. Not just the opening chapter but *Silent Spring* as a whole has a narrative thrust. She outstood in balancing the apocalyptic warnings and the millennial hope to that of mythic representations as well. She is certainly, a crafted writer.

Carson’s *Silent Spring* is often compared with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for its capacity to awaken ethical and moral sense and with Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* for its challenge to the dominant scientific paradigm. Carson invokes Albert Schweitzer’s epitaph to humanity in the introduction of *Silent Spring* “Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth” (Carson 1). The lines are quite symbolic of what she intends to say her readers. The relevance of the book is such that even today it elicits such eloquent response from *Natural Resources Defense Council*

Although they will probably always be less celebrated than wars, marches, riots, or stormy political campaigns, books have at times been the most powerful influencer of social change in American life. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* galvanized radical sentiment in the early days of the evolution; *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe roused the North’s antipathy to slavery in the decade leading up to the Civil War; and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which in 1962 exposed the hazards of the pesticide DDT, eloquently questioned humanity’s faith in technological progress and helped set the stage for the environmental movement. *Natural Resources Defense Council* (2015)

Conclusion:

Silent Spring focussed on the balance of nature and the web of life. With the publication of the book Carson was characterised as the defender of the balance of nature. Carson’s nature was an

² <https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/10/05/reviews/carson-obit.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/10/05/reviews/carson-obit.html>

integrated system characterized by interdependence and mutual benefit. God's providence ensured a system of balance among all living beings and each had their own place in the paradise. This balance, she claims, upon human interference is disturbing the entire web of life as well as the entire eco systems. Secondly the unnatural forced changes in the web whose 'threads' connect organisms and nature will reverberate over time.

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