

An Analysis of Deep Ecological Perspectives in Chris Wedge's *Epic* (2013) and John A Davis' *The Ant Bully* (2006)

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Abstract

Deep ecology by Arne Naess is an ecological theory that propagates the need to appreciate the inherent value of all living organisms. The advent of ecological themes in animated films helps propagate eco-consciousness through audio-visual mediums and nature themes. The research aims to analyze the various deep ecological perspectives in the select animated films *The Ant Bully* (2006) and *Epic* (2013). The article relies on deep ecology perspectives to analyze and select the plot instances and protagonists' evolution from the select films. The paper analyses how both the protagonists shed their egoistic attitudes and develop empathy towards the existence of smaller beings and ecosystems in our environment. The research compares the various themes of the select films through their association with deep ecology philosophy and perspectives. The results of the research explore how both films reflect a deep ecological appreciation of all living beings equally. The research concludes how the realization of the protagonists motivates them to fight against forces that threaten the existence of these miniature ecosystems.

Keywords: Animated Films, Arne Naess, Deep Ecology, Eco-Cinema, Self-Realization.

Introduction

Ecology is known to be "the interdisciplinary scientific study of the living conditions of organisms in interaction with each other and with the surroundings, organic as well as inorganic" (1). The ecological theory known as "deep ecology," which was popularized by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, maintains that all living things, human and non-human, have intrinsic value, regardless of how useful they may be in terms of meeting human needs. According to deep ecology, each living thing has a complicated ecological link with all other living things and should be seen as having moral rights and worth of its own.

"Deep ecology does not separate humans-or anything else- from the natural environment. It does see the world not as a collection of isolated objects but as a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. Deep ecology recognizes the intrinsic value of all human beings and views humans as just one particular strand in the web of life" (2).

Deep ecology, according to Naess, is founded on the premise that humans are a part of nature rather than simply existing in it. In the biosphere's web, he claims, living things are bound by intrinsic

interconnections. The deep ecology theory develops three main viewpoints based on the idea of oneness: (i) the idea that everything has intrinsic value, which "is not dependent on usefulness to human beings"; (ii) biocentric egalitarianism, which is the notion that all entities, whether a cell, an entity, or an ecosystem like the Amazon Basin or the planet Earth, have equal value; and (iii) Self-realization, which is defined as "the view that everything seeks to self-realize itself, however, self-realization is understood, such as enduring for as long as it possibly could and/or in fulfilling its purpose" (3). Based on these broad ideas Arne Naess proposes eight postulates of deep ecology that cater to the development and fostering of ecological attitudes towards life.

"The eight points are:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.

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(Received 29th April 2024; Accepted 16th July 2024; Published 30th July 2024)

3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantially smaller human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires a smaller human population.
5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change will be mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between bigness and greatness.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes" (4).

This research paper roughly categorizes the eight points primarily centered around the following concepts as

- i) Respecting the inherent value within all living beings and how richness and diversity add to these values.
- ii) The impact of human intervention on the ecological balance.
- iii) A call for change in the ideological attitude towards nature that starts with awareness and Self-realization of one's actions.

The research article highlights these deep ecological categories and their perspectives in the select films *The Ant Bully* (2006) and *Epic* (2013). Brereton asserts that "Film has an important role to play in promoting awareness around environmental ethics and helping to construct new modes of engagement through the visualization of environments" (5). Increasing concerns regarding environmental issues and eco-critical awareness have influenced filmmakers to incorporate environmental themes into films. Alexa Weik von Mossner defines the ecocritical film as "films that centrally feature natural environments and nonhuman actors" (6). Jhansi Suresh states "Eco-film theory analyses how the world is reflected, recreated and imagined in film" (7). David Attenborough's series *Our Planet* explains the

impact of human intervention on natural life with magnificent images of species that are almost extinct (8).

Aside from the fact that films are an accessible medium, they can be a useful tool for creating new ways of engaging with environmental crises and motivating audiences. The film is accessible because it is not bounded by language: visuals, sound, and editing can tell a whole story (8). Since film affects the viewers, eco-critical film could be a tool to change the way spectators think about ecological issues (6). According to Alexa Weik von Mossner, audiences could even be encouraged to become active, by watching eco-critical films. According to Marks, films help to sharpen the audience's sensory awareness and thereby contribute to a growing acuity for ecological awareness (6). Animated environmental films are a category that helps create such awareness in a younger audience. These films through their use of animation technology and fictional characters help bring more awareness of ecological problems along with entertainment. In recent decades there have been various research contributions bridging the gap between ecology and animation movies. In their research article titled *Representation of Landscape and Ecological Vision in Miyazaki's Filmography*, Bartolomei, Ippolito, and Mezzino closely studied the role of landscape in the animated films of the Japanese filmmaker. This study analyzes eleven films to identify Miyazaki's use of character-defining elements to promote sustainable urban development while preserving natural elements. It also emphasizes the beauty of the landscape and the importance of its preservation. In another research article (9) titled *Hollywood and Ecology: Raising Awareness through Cinema*, De Gobbi and Francesca investigate politics, comedy, and imagination as critical aspects in the reception of the ecological message. Regardless of the various interpretations that a film can evoke, by presenting such a complex issue, the thesis focuses on the power of the image that a film can deliver, particularly given the capability of a Hollywood production business. (10). In the research article titled *Representing Ecological Crises in Children's Media: An Analysis of The Lorax and Wall-E*, Kylie Carraway and Brett Caraway examine the representation of ecological crises in children's media. They textually analyzed two animated motion pictures i.e. Universal

Pictures' *The Lorax* (2012) and Pixar's *Wall-E* (2008). These films were evaluated based on their anthropomorphic representations, the reduction of collective aspects of ecological crises to the level of interpersonal conflict, greenwashing, and pastoralist themes. They suggest that a more innovative approach to the link between humans and the natural world is essential to mitigate the worst effects of ecological destabilization. In another article (11) titled *The Disneyfication of Climate Crisis: Negotiating Responsibility and Climate Action in Frozen, Moana, and Frozen 2.* "The Lion and the Unicorn" explores these films to enable young activists to envision themselves as change agents while still supporting the environmentally damaging commercial practices that are inherent to neoliberal capitalism. These three films thus serve as case studies for the greater issue of eco-pedagogy's strained connection with the current commercialization of children's culture (12).

Epic is a 2013 American computer-animated film directed by Chris Wedge and loosely based on the 1996 children's book *The Leaf Men and the Brave Good Bugs*. Alice Sterling writes "*Epic*, an animated film, is a fable offering several moral messages. This magical tale shows how to become more empathic, and more sensitive to forces that would destroy the world's healthy ecology...Katherine's adventures lead to her awakening to the reality of the life cycles of the creatures of the forest" (13). In *Ecofeminism in Chris Wedge's Epic*, Agus writes "The representation of nature in the animation movie is not only as just the representation of what it is, but it has deeper values than just an entertaining movie for people" (14). He also states "It can be understood that the forest is neutral" (14). Meanwhile Anthony Cunder talks about how in "Chris Wedge's animated film, *Epic*, death is a villainous figure, personified in the form of Mandrake, the King of Rot. This contemporary interpretation asserts that death is a force that must be overcome by the life of the forest, embodied by Queen Tara and her army of green Leafmen" (15).

The Ant Bully is a 2006 American computer-animated film directed by John A Davis based on a 1999 children's book named *The Ant Bully* written by John Nickle. Siegel. M describes 10-year-old Lucas Nickle as a short, glasses-wearing youngster who gets treated like a much younger child by his

mother, who calls him "Peanut." Steve taunts him, asking, "What are you going to do about it? Nothing since you're small and I'm big" (16). An ant colony in the garden becomes the target of Lucas's pent-up resentment and humiliation, which he uses as a weapon until ant wizard Zoc (voice-over by Nicolas Cage) creates a magical potion that reduces "Lucas the Destroyer" to the size of an ant. Following the boy's capture by the ants, the queen ant (played by Meryl Streep), proceeds to educate him about the lifestyle of the ants, which includes respect for one another, cooperation, and cooperative conduct norms. In the end, these teachings give a suddenly self-assured, mature Lucas the ability to confront his mother and overcome the elder bully as he becomes aware of the strength in one's self (17).

As observed from the previous research studies both these select environmental films through their thematic representation reinstate the power that can initiate environmental action. While *Epic* film has been analyzed based on its eco-feminist inclinations, various reviews of *The Ant Bully* film explore the storyline and its anti-bullying message. Therefore, this paper tries to abridge the research gap by analyzing both films in the light of deep ecological perspectives such as interconnectedness, appreciation of intricate relationships in the non-human world, and also self-realization of the protagonists regarding such ecological values.

Methodology

The methodological approach adopted combines critical viewing and analysis of the films with research into the deep ecological perspectives in the two selected films *The Ant Bully* (2006) and *Epic* (2013). The study proposes a critical analysis of the two selected animated children's motion pictures, chosen based on their thematic relevance and plotlines to deep ecology philosophy. The environmental themes conveyed through the protagonists' journey of self-discovery are analyzed based on the deep ecological perspectives conveyed through i) characters ii) themes iii) the plot of the selected films.

A summary of both films is given below to explain the criteria for choosing the research material or films for this research. *The Ant Bully* is a 2006 American computer-animated film directed by John A Davis based on a 1999 children's book named *The Ant Bully* written by John Nickle. The film shows Lucas, the new boy in the neighborhood

who is bullied by other kids and vents out his frustration on a nearby ant colony. The ants decide to shrink Lucas to their size to teach him a lesson. Lucas is punished by the ant queen to serve the colony and also learn the ways of the ants. In the process of learning their ways and uniting with them to fight against a bug exterminator, Lucas goes through a journey of self-discovery. *Epic* is a 2013 American computer-animated film directed by Chris Wedge and loosely based on the 1996 children's book *The Leaf Men and the Brave Good Bugs*. The film portrays Mary Katherine (MK) who has come back to stay with her estranged father after the death of her mother. She is cynical of her father's research based on an advanced society of tiny-leaf men living in the woods. Meanwhile, the Queen of the forest is attacked after she has chosen a pod as her heir and dies. She entrusts Katherine with the responsibility of seeing to the survival of the pod upon which rests the destiny of the life of the forest. In the process, Katherine is shrunk to a small size as she encounters the leaf men and becomes part of their community in their fight against evil forces.

The research is a qualitative analysis of the selected films interpreted based on their alignment with deep ecological philosophies such as interconnectedness with nature, impact of human intervention, and self-realization.

Instances drawn from the films help to highlight the various ways in which these characters adhere to deep ecology perspectives towards nature. Finally, their journey is explained in connection with deep ecology perspectives such as interconnectedness, the inherent value of all living beings, and the self-realization of these ecological values through a thematic and plotline analysis.

Results

Interconnectedness with Nature

In a 2018 article, Watts mentions how scientists have discovered that "The Earth is far more alive than previously thought, according to "deep life" studies that reveal a rich ecosystem beneath our feet that is almost twice the size of all the world's oceans" (18). Hence he writes about how our relationship with nature has become so strained that it is simply and conveniently forgotten that nature has been incredibly giving despite its gradual disappearance. Although technological and industrial developments have detached us from the natural world, we are still connected with

nature because the majority of the things we use and consume daily are the by-products of nature and today they are in danger of extinction (19). According to Vandana Shiva, the West defines nature as a dead matter that has been exploited for human purposes. The aftereffects of humans' exploitive behavior can be witnessed in the warming of the earth and the extinction of species. Most scientists agree to the fact that climate change is caused by human activities such as energy use, urbanization, and land use changes (20). Similarly, Besthorn [2012], (21) explains that,

"...rather than individual experience as separate from the environment, [in deep ecological theory] the environment exists in individuals as they cultivate awareness of being one with all that exists". Humankind, in their relationship with one another, is the embodiment of nature. Simply stated, there is an interconnectedness of all things, and the dominant behaviors of society affect all things, human and nonhuman (21).

The primary focus of both films is nature which connects all living things. According to the postulates of Arne Naess' deep ecology theory, all forms of life whether human or non-human have a value that is independent of its usefulness to humans. The richness and diversity of all life forms contribute to these values, and humans have no right to reduce these values for selfish needs but can use them only to satisfy their vital requirements (22).

The film *Epic*'s starting lines are as follows.

"00:01:10,035 MK: "Somebody told me once, that if you stand still in the forest long enough, you'll see signs of a hidden struggle. Raging between forces of life and decay. The survival of the forest itself depends on the outcome. And that the good guys need all the help they can get. And that if you don't believe it, take a close look" (23).

Mary Katherine does not believe in her father's claim about the existence of an advanced society of tiny people in the forest but when she is shrunk down to their size and entrusted with the pod that sustains the life of the forest her thought process changes. She gains insights into the interwoven ways of nature. A similar theme is reflected in the film *Moana* which depicts a world in which Te Fiti ('the heart of nature') was exploited and stolen, illustrating how humans affect the environment. This is comparable to the overuse of the island's

natural resources, such as food and fish, in the real world. This demonstrates how, at the film's conclusion, Moana restores the "heart," thereby mending humanity's bond with the natural world (24). The film *Epic* addresses the tiny men as Leaf men and their Queen Tara as the Life of the forest. The film highlights the binaries of nature, life (Leafmen), and death (Mandrake the King of Rot, and his army) as characters that inhabit the forests. The film underscores how species that humans deem little and unimportant are more sophisticated and in harmony with the natural cycle of life than humans, hence reinforcing their interdependence. The following dialogue between Ronin to Mary Katherine reinstates this deep ecological interdependence and inherent value of living beings.

"These little guys are a big part of the ecosystem; they keep the engine running," says Ronin, the chief of the Leaf Men about their society" (23).

The film *'Epic'* has incredibly portrayed these numerous connections through its carefully curated characters and their details. The Leaf men as the title suggests wear helmets and armor made out of leaf and ride small birds saddled up in leaf gear. The Queen (embodiment of Nature's life source) travels in the bloom of a lotus flower along with its leaves all of which are carried by dragonflies. All the tiny people are shown as personified bugs, beetles, birds, mushrooms, acorn shells, butterflies, dragonflies, etc. and even the leaves and moss are shown as alive and admiring the Queen. As mentioned by Gellel, "In a movie, symbols are usually embedded both in its visual elements as well as in the language being used to narrate the story" (25). The film *Epic* uses non-human beings as symbols to depict the liveliness of nature. The film *Epic* portrays all such life-sustaining beings as colorful, green, and subtly alive in movement and speech thus catering more to the psychology of the younger audience to associate the same characteristics with their real-life environments.

The film also features the villains as destruction and death symbolized through rodents of all kinds, bats, crows, etc. in a grimmer, grey morbid outlook trying to destroy the balance of life by spreading rot and decay over the forest. Even these creatures wear the skeletons and fur of dead rodents and armor themselves with skulls bones and dead arrows that spread decay. These symbols act as a

metaphorical representation of the industries that belch grey smoke and chemicals into the biosphere causing the death of nature through pollution, over-consumption of natural resources as well as deforestation. Greenfield discusses that the main cause of the devastation of Earth's biosphere is attributed to deforestation and the conversion of natural areas for human food production (26). The King of Boggans or Mandrake also talks about how "The forest wasn't grown in a day but we can destroy it in one" (23). This draws parallels to how Greenfield mentions in his research that "Wildlife populations are in freefall around the world, driven by human overconsumption, population growth and intensive agriculture, according to a major new assessment of the abundance of life on Earth" (26). Whereas Ronin tells Katherine, "Many leaves, one tree" is a motto that the leaf men live by. He explains "We are all individuals but we are still connected. No one is on their own" (23). These words in still a sense of deep questioning in Katherine about the way she observes the world around her. The deep ecology movement tries to clarify the fundamental presuppositions underlying our economic approach in terms of value priorities, philosophy, and religion. The deep ecology movement is therefore "the ecology movement that questions deeper" into our belief systems, lifestyle choices, and connections with nature (27). The film incorporates contrasting color palettes (vibrant bright shades of nature vs dull grim grey shades of black) to the characters to visually allude to the characteristics of real nature vs human industries to the audience. Such visual metaphors and conversations incorporated into the film highlight the deep ecological philosophy of the interconnectedness of all living beings as well as the deep ecology postulate that reinstates the inherent value of all living beings.

Similarly, in the film *The Ant Bully*, Lucas is bullied by a big boy who asks "What are you going to do? Nothing because I'm big and you're small" (16). Lucas is frustrated and takes it out on a nearby ant colony while he says "What are you going to do? Nothing cause I'm big and you're small" (16). Lucas' re-enactment of his oppression upon the ants in the ant colony leads to destruction of their home and fear of losing their lives. When he gets shrunk to their size he realizes, he is referred to as 'Peanut the Destroyer'. He is taken to the Ant Queen who is well-regarded by every ant in the

colony. He justifies his destructive actions by saying that he wasn't aware that ants had their own lives or jury trials or even a society. He states "I thought it was just a bunch of stupid ants." This shows that Lucas is oblivious to the intricate relationship among the ants and the repercussions of his actions on the tiny creatures. He is charged by the ants on the following account "..... this human destructor beast has wilfully without forethought led to the destruction of our food chambers, hatching chambers and flooded the colony with yellow rain" (16). He is asked to serve his sentence of learning the lifestyle of the ants and entrusted to Nova who will teach him to be an ant. Lucas retorts this is 'inhuman' and the ant replies "Yes, it is", which is an ironic answer considering the after-effects of the actions of human beings towards nature. While trying to learn their ways he is told that "No ant gets left behind" (16). He is put along with other ants to complete a group task. Lucas struggles to cope with their ant-like abilities of moving fast, jumping, and climbing surfaces and is arrogant to not cooperate with them. Despite that the approach him since he is their team member. When they fail eventually on his account, he is disappointed in himself and starts trying to change his ways. He immediately tries to undo the exterminator contract he signed to eradicate the pests as he understands the threat it poses to the ants as their survival is integral to his own. The film incorporates instances that send ecological messages to younger audiences through the association they can create with such group tasks and shared activities based on real-life school activities. By highlighting the message that all are equal and unified the film can convey to its audience the deep ecological perspective of interconnectedness and inherent value of all living beings.

Intricate Relationships

'Humans never were humans' states biologist Haraway in her book 'When Species Meet' (8). Followed by an explanation about how 90 percent of the cells in the human body are "filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, of which play a symphony necessary to being alive at all", she states that "to be one, is always to become with many". Haraway tries to show the connectivity of humans and non-humans, to undo this binary and show the interconnectedness of the world (8).

The film *Epic* focuses on deep ecology philosophy by showing how the pod of a tiny flower in itself can be the harbinger of the life of the entire forest. All the creatures gather to show their devotion to this life source they are all connected. Even this little pod is shown to need slugs whose natural lubricated bodies keep it moist and alive. The slug named Grub says "We keep it moist. Moist, is what we do" (23). In their research, Denny as well as Jones discuss how slugs due to their primarily water-based bodies, are vulnerable to desiccation since they lack a fully developed shell. To survive, they must produce shielding mucus. Due to the wet terrain, many species are most active during the night or right after a rain. Because they consume fungi and decompose plant matter, slugs are vital to the ecology (26, 28). Such vital information is subtly conveyed to the audience through the dialogue of the slug character enhancing the deep ecological aspects of the film's narrative technique. After the death of the Queen, all creatures gather for shelter in a large tree that preserves the scrolls or every memory of the forest. This is a visual metaphor for ecological wisdom that lies within the forests. By visualizing and highlighting that every memory of the forest is preserved in trees the film through audio-visual songs and characters the film reinstates the ecological importance of trees in maintaining and preserving ecological balance to the audience. The film displays a detailed visual in the forest where Katherine comes across a deer that allows them to ride on its antlers. The film also shows how Katherine's dog Ozzy is also able to see and interact with the tiny creatures. It reinstates those non-human beings are more connected to their natural environments and acknowledges all forms of life irrespective of size. Through the realization of the character Mary Katherine's understanding of how non-living beings interact with each other irrespective of size, the film can portray the deep ecological message of inherent value and intricate interconnectedness within nature. Unlike humans, these non-humans maintain balance in the appreciation of every living being's inherent worth and the film evokes the same deep questioning within its audience as well.

In *The Ant Bully* Lucas is seen lying atop a mushroom and looking at the sky. He observes that "The sky looks the same. Everything else looks different but it's the same sky and the same stars"

(16). This remark shows a deep questioning of Lucas and his place in the world, that he is no different from the ants who live under the same sky as he does. He realizes that every living being is interconnected. The film also illustrates how Lucas starts caring for other ants and makes a sincere effort to learn their ways and earn their friendship. He sheds his arrogant attitude towards ants and even saves a random wasp from choking and dying and exclaims their motto that 'no ant gets left behind' and the wasp expresses his gratitude by saying 'Thank you little ant' (16). Lucas takes the initiative to bring a truce between the ants and wasps so that they can jointly fight against the exterminator. This realization of Lucas that the physical size of any living being doesn't matter but rather the interconnectedness between species is what matters through his lessons learned reinstates deep ecological principles in the film.

Human Interference

The film '*Epic*' shows a small yet important conversation between a flower bud and an acorn as follows, "The whole meadow just died. Everything was green. Now it's all gone" to which the acorn replies "I grew up in that meadow" (23). These lines show us the unseen yet large-scale impact of human interference that can lead to the destruction of ecologically intricate structures which play a key role in balancing life amongst creatures. The arrows used by the Boggans are shown to bring immediate death to anything they touch and this signifies the excessive use of chemicals and fertilizers by industries which decrease the life source of the soil and kill all "unnecessary weeds and bugs" whose existence are wiped out completely from their natural habitat. Such allusions to real-life environmental issues through the conversations of characters help portray the movie in a more deeply ecological perspective. In the film *Epic*, the fireflies are asked to send codes to the rest of the forest through their patterned light signals.

"The way fireflies turn on and off their lights is what sets them apart. According to research, fireflies' lights are activated by signals sent from their brains to unique light organs located in their abdomens. The chemical interaction that produces light occurs in their abdomen" (29).

Ant Bully also shows how the exterminator or the Cloud Breather's weapons suffocate and choke the

flies, bugs, and ants and kill them. "To attack without provocation without reason just because they can. It's barbaric" (16). This remark by one of the ants in the council reflects on the thoughtlessness and the destructive nature of humans towards nature and its intricate connections. The exterminator in *The Ant Bully* is an equivalent of the Boggans in the *Epic* film as both bring destruction and death through pollution. They are metaphors for the excessive human interference with nature. The use of visual metaphors, characters, and dialogues helps the audience regardless of age to contemplate the adverse impact of human actions upon nature.

The films also show the significance of connecting with the ecological values and the wisdom we have. In *Epic* Katherine is asked to go to Nimbus who resides in a large tree full of scrolls that contains knowledge from the history of the forests. It is through revisiting the Queen's memory that she realizes her role in sustaining the life of the forest, similarly in *The Ant* film, The Queen's final words to Lucas after accepting him as a member of their colony is "Remember us" a subtle reminder to always keep nature in mind.

Further Scope of Research

Both films align with the principles of ecofeminism. While in the film *Epic*, Katherine is chosen by the Queen of the forest Queen Tara who guides her to find her purpose and reason in life, in *The Ant Bully* Lucas is given a chance by the Queen of the colony to learn their ways and is guided by Nova whose care and nurture helps Lucas to cultivate empathy towards nature. Both films subtly shed light on the inconsiderate actions of humans towards nature; they depict humans as stompers who destroy everything. The eco-feminist reading of both these movies will further abridge the areas of ecofeminism in animated movies.

Both films also throw light on the importance of relationships and individuality. Both Mary Katherine and Lucas are disconnected from the people in their lives. While Katherine struggles to reunite with her estranged father, Lucas struggles to find his voice within his home or even to stand up against the bully who abuses him. Both these protagonists' tryst with nature and its interconnectedness helps them to develop a stronger character in tune with nature and its human and non-human beings. A psychological

reading of both these films will abridge the areas between psychology and animated movies.

Discussion

According to Naess' Deep ecology standards, namely Self-realization and Bio-centric Egalitarianism, if one destroys nature, one also affects oneself. Naess' self-realization is drawn from M K Gandhi's principle of non-dualistic philosophy of Advaita where the 'self' is realized in the highest or Universal Self or Atman shedding one's egoistic interests. He also propagated the unity between human and non-human living beings' interconnectedness.

"Self-realization!" is in part motivated by the belief that maturity in human beings can be measured along a scale from selfishness to a broadening and deepening of the self, rather than measures of dutiful altruism (30).

The protagonists of both the select films are confronted with questions that lead to their introspection and self-realization of their actions toward the environment.

In the film *The Ant Bully*, Lucas lies atop a mushroom looking at the sky and stars with Zoc the wizard ant, and carries on the following conversation.

"Zoc: So, this city of yours is like a nest? So all the humans that live there, are all brothers working together for the greatness of their colony?"

Lucas: Well it's more like every man for himself

Zoc: That's so primitive. How does anything get done?

Lucas: Some people work together.

Zoc: Some? Why not all?

Lucas: I suppose it is because of their differences.

Zoc: But it's the differences that make a colony strong. Foragers, Scouts, drones, nurses, regurgitators. They are all different but an essential part of the whole. This is where we ants draw our strength.

Lucas: Some humans prefer to clobber people they don't understand

Zoc: Is it like how you prefer to clobber ants?

Lucas: I guess I didn't think about what I was doing" (16).

This conversation emphasizes the co-existence of ants and other non-human beings for collective wellness claiming to be the more evolved and self-aware species, unlike human beings who run after selfish interests. These insects follow the rules of pristine order, and idleness is inadmissible to the

colony. They carry out their assigned task with a knowledge base and actions that transcend our understanding. "Basic research on ants can help us to understand epidemiological processes, which can be relevant also in other social groups" (31). After the conversation, Lucas comes to realize that he is no different from the bully bullying him as he resorted to similar means while destroying the ant colony. He realizes the deep ecological philosophy that all creatures are equal and have an inherent worth.

Similar to this, in the film *Epic*, Katherine meets several non-human beings, each of whom is shown to play a crucial part in preserving and balancing the environment. Her ecological insights are awakened when she revisits the Queen's final memory in which she tells Katherine "...The pod needs you...You are here for a reason. Maybe you don't see the connections yet. But just because you don't see them doesn't mean it's not there" (23). Even during her impatient conversation with the scroll keeping larvae named Nim Galuu about using the scrolls to know how she can get back home as soon as possible, he says "The scrolls don't tell us the future. They only guide us with knowledge of the past" (23). It indicates that we should co-exist with all living beings maintaining balance with nature and attuning to the ecological wisdom of the past generations. Deep ecological perspectives are also reflected in the following lines of the *Epic* film "You will get back what you have given", and "The fate of that pod affects all of us" (23).

"According to deep ecology, the self should be understood as deeply connected with and as part of nature, not disassociated from it. Deep ecologists often call that conception of human nature the "ecological self," and it represents humans acting and being in harmony with nature, not in opposition to it. According to Naess, when the ecological self is realized, it will recognize and abide by the norms of an environmental ethic that will end the abuses of nature that typify the traditional self, which is trapped in anthropocentric attitudes. Moreover, the ecological self will practice a "biocentric egalitarianism," in which each natural entity is held as being inherently equal to every other entity" (32).

In both select films, the protagonists Lucas' and Mary Katherine's self-discovery helps them

actualize deep ecological values by standing up to fight against evil forces and support the life of nature in its balance. Their renewed sense of 'Self' or ecological self helps them to regain their lost relationships. We are shown that Mary Katherine who was estranged from and used to despise her father's research later reunites with him and helps him with his research on the Leaf men while Lucas who used to willingly destroy the ant colony is later shown to give sugar or jellybeans to the ants. Both films cater to the conventional narration techniques of environmental films by presenting a linear plot that presents an environmental problem that the protagonist must face. The films use colorful backgrounds and present their protagonists as teenage characters that make them more associable with the audience. The problems faced by both Mary Katherine as well as Lucas are also closely associated with the teenage group. The viewpoint presented also highlights and brings awareness to younger audiences about the environmental problems around them.

Conclusion

The research focused on the ecological self-discovery of the protagonists, Mary Katherine from the film *Epic* and Lucas from the film *The Ant Bully*. Lucas and Mary Katherine (MK) fight to preserve this richness and diversity of nature by standing up and fighting for the collective good of nature's survival against forces of destruction. The films highlight how such forces of destruction are mostly caused by or related to human beings' neglect of non-human beings, through the antagonists portrayed and the concept they represent. (The Exterminator with all sorts of pesticides to kill the insects in the film *The Ant Bully* or Mandrake, the king of Boggans, or creatures that bring decay and death to the forest in the film *Epic*). The research suggests that such pro-environmental themes incorporated into animated films help cultivate a deep sense of pro-ecological perspective among viewers. The resultant realization from watching ecological films helps to initiate pro-environmental actions in younger as well as older audiences as the protagonists are also shown to actualize these ecological values of deep appreciation for nature. The research highlights how the protagonists' realization of such selfish activities of human beings awakens their ecological sense of 'Self'. Lucas was bullied for being smaller in size and Mary Katherine was

feeling lost and without a purpose after her mother's death. The time Lucas spends with the ant colony helps him gain perspective and confidence to embrace his true self and stand up to his bullies and the Exterminator to save the colony. Similarly, the time Mary Katherine spends with the Leafmen helps her save the forests from the attack of Mandrake and his army and also reconnect with her dad and find a new purpose in life ahead. The research throws light on how quality time spent in nature and amongst non-human beings helps humans connect more deeply to their ecological self and rediscover a holistic sense of identity through the characters Lucas and Mary Katherine. Both selected films dedicate characters and scenes to visualize the richness and diversity of microcosmic ecosystems and the interconnectedness of all living beings within such systems through their other characters. The research concludes that both the selected films reflect deep ecological perspectives through their protagonists' journey of self-discovery and interaction with the natural world and its non-human beings.

Abbreviations

MK: Mary Katherine

Acknowledgement

The authors have acknowledged all terms and conditions of this journal.

Author Contributions

Both authors have contributed equally to this research.

Conflict of Interest

On behalf of all authors, there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

Funding

No funding has been received or granted for this research.

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