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A Phyto-Analytical Approach to Selected Contemporary Children's Books: Eco-Pedagogical Implications

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ABSTRACT

Beyond its entertainment value, children's literature contributes to cognitive, affective, and behavioral development through its content. Given the growing importance of sustainability and ecological issues in today's world, children's books play a critical role in shaping and reshaping children's ecological perspectives and learning. Despite this, the portrayal of plants in literary studies, including children's books, remains understudied. Hence, as a qualitative study of children's books, this study investigates the representation of plants in contemporary children's books through the Phyto-analytical approach, eco-pedagogy, and critical theory. Accordingly, 11 children's books for ages 8 and 10 were analyzed using multiple close-reading procedures. Findings indicated problematic aspects in the portrayal of plants and revealed that, while plants are visible across the selected texts, they are not presented as agents or empowered beings. Plants are predominantly portrayed in anthropocentric ways, serving as metaphors, decorative elements, or sources of food and materials for human consumption without any critical-evaluative position attached to their being.

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INTRODUCTION

> Nature produces infinite variety.
> Man (the taxonomist) desires,
> imagines, and describes uniformity.
> Therein lies perpetual confusion and conflict.
> Before obvious differences can be evaluated,
> we need to understand their nature,
> extent, and probable causes.
>
> *Ball (1946, p. 371)*

The quotation above exemplifies nature's major quality: variety, and humans' important preoccupation: their evaluation of nature's existence in an infinite number of forms. Almost all of humans' evaluative skills are developed through education, during which we learn new ways of thinking and acting about our natural and cultural surroundings. According to critical theoreticians, the primary goal of education is to transform students as well as teachers into responsible citizens, enabling them to

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develop the capacities and abilities of other citizens as intellectuals, and hence, teachers are expected to design curricula that prepare students to be active and critical participants, citizens, in society (Giroux, 1985). Just about any material and tool can be used in such a transformative learning and teaching process, with media and literary texts being the most significant, given that the increasing racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of student populations and societies forces teachers to use literature as a tool for culturally sensitive and responsive pedagogy. Hence, it is expected of teachers to be willing to take risks by stepping away from prescribed, mandated curricula that shift students' attention and energy toward standardized tests, and to address complex social topics that may disrupt traditional, narrow educational experiences and values, thereby supporting the establishment of a democratic society. To do that, education, especially children's education, becomes of utmost importance, since the democratization of citizens requires consistent, time-consuming involvement.

The integration of values through high-quality children's literature is essential as a counter-narrative to a deadening pedagogy, as Giroux (2012) describes it: educational processes characterized by rote memorization, conformity, and high-stakes testing. Such traditional educational processes focus on developing learners' cognitive skills, although abstract realities such as values remain underdeveloped. Amidst this, reading children's literature appears to be an important activity because of its powerful value in restoring student engagement. It can be seen that when instruction focuses solely on developing cognitive skills, such as preparing students for standardized tests, student excitement for learning tends to wither, leaving students' potential in other areas, such as the emotional and behavioral domains, underdeveloped. Literature, like many subject areas or instructional materials, may be (re)conceptualized as a transformative tool that enables students to move beyond basic comprehension to read the world through the word (Freire, 1970), fostering a deeper understanding of their immediate contexts while feeling responsible to change the ways in which they do not want to submit. Following Freire's work, critical theorists and practitioners in education have rejected the claim that schooling is an apolitical and value-neutral process and argued that schools often reproduce the values and privileges of the dominant culture (Darder, 1991, p. 78), who may have little to say, or no willingness to state, the societies face today.

Education begins as soon as humans are born, "with evolved cognitive mechanisms affording children, and later adults, the ability to acquire the social and technological skills needed for success in any of the many possible human cultures" (Bjorklund, 2022, p. 2266). Accordingly, children's literature, both oral and written, is a fundamentally important genre without which the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual development of younger generations cannot be planned. Keeping these in mind, children's books are well-suited to the qualities of this age group, as such books include eye-catching settings and characters for children who "have a strong desire to understand their environment better and are eager to do so" (Hamid & Misnar, 2025, p. 173). Although "how to find a good book" is still a major concern for teachers, parents, and children themselves, the writer shoulders a major burden since "Perhaps the greatest challenge for any writer of non-fiction for children is taking an essentially adult topic and presenting the material in a way that children will find interesting, while still keeping faithful to the facts" (Literature for Children, 1987, p. 679).

Additionally, children's literature is often described as a complex and multifaceted genre, as its theoretical definitions and scope cannot be strictly determined by many researchers and experts. In parallel, Hunt (2001) underlines that its resistance to fitting neatly into any single cultural or academic classification is one of its most distinctive qualities, making the study of children's books and stories challenging yet satisfying and enjoyable. The theoretical complexity of children's literature has been reiterated in both national and international scholarly discussions, leading to considerable variation in its classification by origin and subgenres. In line with Hunt's (2001) views, Huck et al. (1993) and Oğuzkan (2013) point out that the elusive nature of theoretical definitions and a diversity of origins also stem from the way children are socially

conceptualized, in that childhood is culturally and historically determined, shaped, and reshaped by the norms of different countries, societies, and disciplines across decades. Therefore, it is challenging to formulate a precise and universally accepted definition of children's literature. For instance, as Postman (1994) argues, the notion of childhood was highly subtle and elusive in Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages. Thus, there were no literary works specifically designed for children, especially when viewed from a contemporary perspective. In the same vein, Jenks (1996) underlines that children were disregarded in the historical trajectory of children's literature in the West simply because books intended for children existed in the 17th-century West, the great majority of such books were either religious or didactic in tone. Children's books resembling today's child-centered, playful, and attractive books in the market emerged during the 19th century, the period that Hunt (2001) dubbed the first golden age of children's literature.

Regardless of these theoretical and scholarly debates, children's literature, historically, begins with traditional oral literature, disseminated through storytelling. Myths, fables, parables, legends, and folktales have historically been the backbone of children's literature and continue to inspire today's children's books. Although they were not explicitly intended for children, those ancient stories were used to teach moral lessons, educating and entertaining children, and thus were laden with symbolic meanings. In many of the traditional stories (e.g., myths, legends, folktales, etc.), human characters are interwoven with plants, animals, fantastical beings (e.g., gods, elves, dragons, etc.), and inanimate elements (e.g., mountains, rivers, celestial bodies, etc.) to create an intense supernatural atmosphere, capturing the young learners' attention. According to Boyles (2018), texts written for children should include dynamic characters who are felt like heroes and role models who overcome various difficulties while learning their lessons from their experiences. In children's literature, many of these characters are animals, plants, or fantastic creatures who, for children, are easy to relate to because of their strong fantasy worlds.

Ancient stories construct an integrated imaginative universe in which human beings, plants, and animals coexist, talk, feel, work, and act together within a fantastic social environment. Such coexistence within the realm of story symbolizes a truth about humanity, embedded in cultural symbols, that requires creativity to construct and to dismantle mentally to process the meanings behind these representations. Thus, stories convey a profound human reality embedded in their structure through symbolic language, extraordinary events, and the adventures of heroes (Şenocak & Alsaç, 2017). Similar to song lyrics, the "metaphor is one of the most common ways of expressing feelings and conveying meaning stylistically and effectively" in various texts; hence, a multitude of figures of speech enrich the narratives written for children, requiring careful examination to understand their content (Aras et al., 2024, p. 48). Hence, because "Children become familiar with the language style of books and begin to learn how to derive meaning of language and how it applies to the world around them from books" (Plotka, 2025, Article 3), children's books should be studied in terms of both language and content in a way to find and use the most appropriate materials develop both the learners' various abilities as well as to develop educational systems that enforce a more intended future. Regarding the language of such materials, learning about their stylistic aspects will inevitably enrich the classroom atmosphere, enabling children to discover and use the language they are learning in meaningful and helpful ways (Zorba, Cihantimur, & Arikan, 2025). Owing to the fact that educational researchers' efforts target informing writers to develop appropriate materials for children, themes in these works become a central concern when the issue of national and global values (e.g., family, country, nation, nature, etc.) are considered since literary works are listed among the most critical functions and objectives of children's literature (Hunt, 2001; Oğuzkan, 2013; Parlevliet, 2012; Taylor, 1975). Therefore, teaching global and national values through children's literature contributes significantly to children's cognitive, affective, and behavioral development (Lickona, 1993). Teaching of global and national values is most effective when supported by carefully

selected children's literature, as fictional characters with whom children can identify also enable children to more readily adopt and apply moral and cultural values than traditional textbook-based instruction (Gibbs & Earley, 1994; Lickona, 1993; Weaver, 1994). This emphasis on the educational and moral functions of children's literature reflects the formative role that early literary experiences play in shaping children's understanding of social, cultural, and ethical norms. In line with this, Zipes (2005) underlines that:

> As children, we listen to many different stories, become acquainted with their rhythms and movements, learn to read narratives, and create our own. As adults, we continue this literary tradition through our customs and methods of nurturing, educating, and entertaining children, and these customs and methods have profoundly influenced social structures and cultural mores throughout the centuries. Indeed, the literature of our childhood establishes the foundations of literacies of many kinds. (p. xxvii)

Like teachers, educational researchers have been developing new and effective ways to teach children knowledge, values, and behaviors to prepare them to live in a planned way in the world. Holyoke and Fletcher (2026), among many, advocate for appropriate materials for children to teach them about the ecological crisis we have been facing for the last few decades, by posing important questions:

> How can we follow children's questions about the world? How can we nurture their sense of wonder, justice, and responsibility? And how do we create learning spaces where all children see themselves as valued members of a shared and sustainable world? (p. 9)

To find answers to these well-articulated and timely questions, a closer look at eco-pedagogy can help conceptualize the status of children's literature in today's world, which requires implementing sustainability initiatives at all levels and in every corner of the world.

Eco-pedagogy

Eco-pedagogy shares roots with critical theory, prioritizing ecological, environmental, and sustainability issues (Hossain, 2024). Within this scope, eco-pedagogy does not regard technology and ecology as opposing forces; rather, they are considered parallel tracks, each of which may contribute to the existence and development of the other (Gadotti, 2009). From this standpoint, despite the similar focal points and aims, eco-pedagogy is distinguished from environmental education (EE) in that EE is mainly concerned with imbuing students with environmental awareness, knowledge, attitudes, responsibility and producing solutions for ecological issues through changing decision making, eco-pedagogy, due to its deep roots in critical theory, prioritizes questioning, critiquing and changing social, economic, political systems that lead to environmental problems (Hung, 2021; Misiaszek, 2016). Accordingly, pedagogical principles of eco-pedagogy cluster around dialogic, problem-posing, interdisciplinary, experiential, and praxis-driven classroom practice (Hung, 2021; Misiaszek, 2016). Such an approach entails

> the ability to read for deepened understandings of more localized, contextual causes and effects of environmental violence, widened understandings from others' perspectives beyond the self-defined local and effects upon Nature beyond humans, and the intersectionalities between them (Misiaszek, 2023, p. 53).

With this in mind, what students read and how they reflect on it play a critical role in instilling in them the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and awareness of ecology and sustainability.

Ecology and Children's Literature

Although, in the field of biology, ecology refers to the scientific study of "the distribution and abundance of organisms" (Begon et al., 2006, p. xi) and the relationships between organisms and their environments (McNaughton & Wolf, 1998), in literary studies, the root of ecocriticism is based on the notion of the environmental crisis (Marland, 2013) whose repercussions manifest themselves as "crisis of the imagination" in literature. Thus, the amelioration of this crisis "depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it" (c, 1995, p. 2). These efforts to find better ways have so far

undergone various changes in the last three decades, and today, as Buell (2005) underlines,

> As literary eco discourse becomes more widely practiced, more globally networked, more interdisciplinary, and thus even more pluriform, the participants must become more increasingly aware of speaking from some position within or around the movement rather than for it (p. viii).

Buell's (2005) caveats are evident in many studies criticizing specific literary works from ecocritical or environmental perspectives. Yadav and Sinha's (2024) bibliometric analysis revealed that studies on ecocriticism have increasingly focused on sustainability, animal studies, and climate change. These findings indicate that environmental critics have rarely attributed special significance to plants, with human beings and animals being prioritized in much ecocritical research (Zorba et al., 2024a). In line with this, as Gagliano et al. (2017) argue, over the past five years, research on animals has been conducted at approximately twice the rate of research on plants. Therefore, there is a paucity of studies that focus on plants from ecological, environmental, or ecocritical perspectives. In parallel, Zorba et al. (2024a) emphasize the need for literary studies that focus on the portrayal of vegetal entities, as such studies provide significant impetus to literary studies and the humanities in today's world, where environmental problems are causing severe destruction. Thus, children's feelings about and conceptualizations of nature are significantly important in their meaning processes because "Many young children come to school with limited direct experience with natural environments," the majority of them "have little understanding and great fears about what may happen to them in their encounters with nature" (Wilson, 1995, p. 7).

Children's literature lends itself well to ecological and environmental issues because of its long-standing, close thematic relationship with nature. Reynolds (2011) underlines that childhood has been strongly associated with nature children's stories since the second half of the 20th century. Many children's stories are set in forests, gardens, riversides, or other natural spaces that serve not only as backdrops but also as active agents in the plot. For instance, in the *Dede Korkut* narratives, plants such as the mountain flower were used for medicinal purposes in pre-modern pharmacy, while plants like the tree of life appeared as symbolic elements at the metaphorical level (Gedik, 2020). In addition, the plants that appear in children's books primarily reflect the influence of nature on the works produced. Through personification of animals, plants, and landscapes, children's books help them develop empathy for nonhuman life, thereby challenging anthropocentric perspectives. The power of children's literature to foster learners' awareness of sustainability and ecology is underscored by previous studies (Arikan & Zorba, 2024; Zorba et al., 2024a, 2024b), although various literary texts depict characters in direct coexistence with plants and flowers (Arikan, 2015a). Amidst all these, Rogers and Berger (2024) underline that "humans in general lack an awareness of plants", and literary or not, all texts require new forms of reading to raise awareness of this much-neglected group of species called the plants.

Given the didactic and instructional purposes of children's books, these stories have great potential to instill moral and ecological values while also teaching them about cause-and-effect relationships. Therefore, the relationship between childhood, literature, and nature awaits serious examination, especially because there is little guidance in the related literature that is practical enough to help decision makers about the materials that should be used in classrooms, as well as in children's extracurricular time. Hence, this study investigates the representation of plants in contemporary children's books through the Phyto-analytical approach, eco-pedagogy, and critical theory.

METHOD

Research Design

This study follows a qualitative design, specifically content analysis, which examines textual patterns using a combination of various analytical techniques (Hoffman, Wilson, Martinez, & Sailors, 2011, p. 29). The primary analytical technique used in the study was phyto-analysis, structured based on Guanio-Uluru's

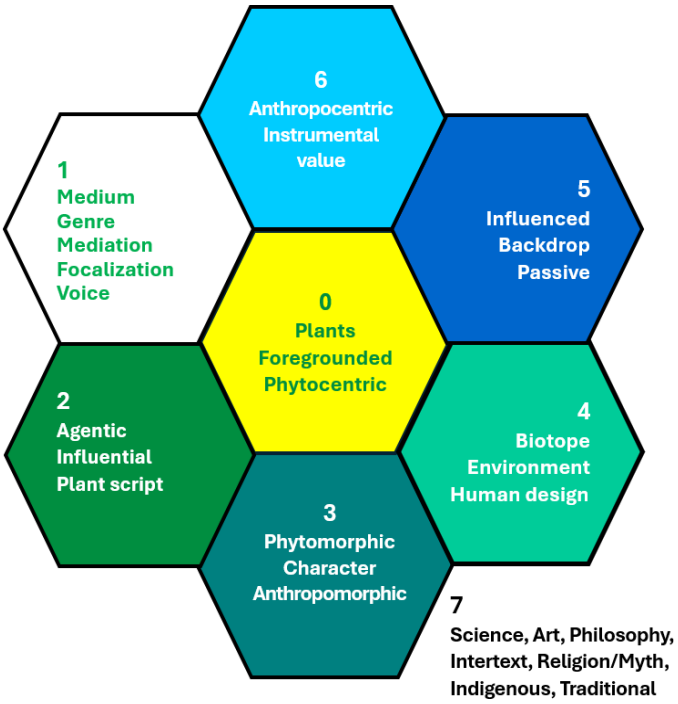


Fig. 1: The Phyto-analysis Map (adapted from Guanio-Uluru, 2023, p. 154)

(2023) Phyto-analysis Map. Grounded in critical theory and eco-pedagogical principles, the study was methodologically structured to systematically investigate how plants are treated and portrayed in children's fiction and non-fiction.

Phyto-analysis map

The map consists of seven petals; six petals are presented in the shape of a flower, and the seventh petal represents roots (see Figure 1). Although the petals are enumerated to illustrate the steps to be followed in analyzing a literary work, the design of the model also enables different movement patterns, allowing for transitions between petals. Given that the map prioritizes phytocentric perspectives, plants and phytocentrism are positioned at the center of the flower shape, serving as the point of departure (0 petal).

Petal 1 essentially serves as both a mediator and the voice of the plants. The aim at this stage is to reveal how plants are represented in the texts. The question of representation presents itself in two forms: "Do plants become more visible when they are not the medium of representation, or less? Or does the medium make little difference to the treatment of plants in children's narratives?" (Guanio-Uluru, 2023, p. 155). Petal 2 initially aims to question the agency of plants in literary works through these questions: "Are the plants represented as exerting their forces on their surroundings? What forces are being exerted upon them in turn?" (Guanio-Uluru, 2023, p. 156). Additional questions also exist in this petal. For example, in the text, is there a unique way of communication or interaction between plants (plant script) or between plants and other living beings? Petal 3 explores how plant characters are verbally described or visually portrayed in literary works by asking: Are plant characters commonly represented as beings with phytomorphic (plant-like) or anthropomorphic (human-like) characteristics, or as an amalgam of both? Petal 4 builds on the previous section and focuses on how plant characters

are depicted in the story's setting. Therefore, the most critical question is "Are the plant characters parts of a biotope [vegetal context], or are they located in human-made or managed environments?" (Guanio-Uluru, 2023, p. 159).

Petal 5 challenges the common belief that plants in children's books are portrayed as passive and silent, serving as unobtrusive backdrops. Yet, when carefully analyzed, there might be evidence that contradicts this notion. Therefore, are there any plants that play a crucial role in the protagonist's achievements (i.e., a kind of help without which the outcome would be failure)? This question reveals the subtle meanings and functional roles implicitly attributed to plants in literary works, even though they occupy a background role in the story. Petal 6 aims to reveal the instrumental variety and value of the plants in literary works. In the great majority of children's books, plants are depicted as an instrument or tool used by someone (i.e., the author, the protagonist, the antagonist, or any other main or minor character) for a specific purpose. Therefore, plants are often seen in the text as part of the landscape, as objects, or as symbols of a specific ideology. Lastly, Petal 7 allows and encourages researchers to move beyond the story and to view plants through an intertextual lens, questioning and investigating other texts that "may present differing views on, and attitudes towards, plants" (Guanio-Uluru, 2023, p. 153).

Sample

The book selection process was conducted following specific criteria. Only books available in the town library were considered. These works were written for children aged 8 to 10. In addition, preference was given to books authored by Turkish writers, mainly because the preliminary step in such an ecocritical endeavor should start with the regional and cultural texts, as, in the case of the Turkish academic, we should study

> the literary output of the centuries-long Central Asian ancestors of the present-day Turks, the Anatolian and Central Asian Turks' shamanistic past, the Orhon inscriptions [the oldest written documents of the Turkish language], the myths of the Oguz Turks, Anatolian Sufism, and Anatolian people's literary heritage, past and present, embedded in our Toprak Ana [Mother Earth] to bring out the ecological impulse at the root of them all and to bring back engagement with our lands (Özdağ, 2009, p. 141, as cited in Arikan, 2015b, no page).

Finally, the book selection prioritized currency and popularity. Therefore, among children's books published in the last eight years, the ones that readers most frequently borrowed were selected, as can be seen in Table 1.

Analysis

These books underwent multiple close readings guided by the Phyto-analysis Map. Noting that "Noticing plants is only one step" (Rogers & Berger, 2024, p. 319) toward understanding the human-plant relationship, the texts were read to reveal the social, cultural, and ideological connections they bring to light. Hence, a plant could serve in the text to identify a color, smell, or shape; signify a value such as benevolence; function as a metaphor to reveal something about the story's characters' physical appearance; or simply be eaten as food. Similarly, reading more deeply into the plant, as it is woven into the storyline alongside other elements, one can see that the same plant may exemplify broader historical and ideological realities such as imperialism or fundamentalism. Hence, the texts were read repeatedly to uncover how their elements relate to broader realities surrounding both plants and other organic and inorganic entities, including humans. Both researchers read the materials and first coded the findings separately. Then, after comparing their results, the final version of the findings was accepted in full.

FINDINGS

A Story of a Meeting

This book is about a boy named Umut who dreams of having a tree that he can use as a bookshelf or flying a durable kite. Plants are featured in the story for two main reasons: first, they are used to create

Table 1: The Selected Children's Books

Author	Year	Book Title	Publication House
Ak, S.	2017	*Bir Tanışma Öyküsü* (Tr)	Doğan & Egmont
		A Story of a Meeting (Eng)	
Beşik, H.	2022	*Vitamin Sofrası* (Tr)	Diyanet İşleri
		The Dining Table Full of Vitamins (Eng)	
Gökalp, S.	2020	*Manu'nun Kalbi* (Tr)	Uşan Kitap
		Manu's Heart (Eng)	
Oral, F.	2022	*Meyveleri Kim Yemiş?* (Tr)	Yapı Kredi Yayınları
		Who Ate the Fruits? (Eng)	
Orçun, H	2022	*Şarkı Söyleyen Kurbağalar* (Tr)	Martı Çocuk
		Frogs Who Sing Songs (Eng)	
Gökçek, H.	2021	*Üç Balığın Hikayesi* (Tr)	Çıra Çocuk
		The Story of The Three Fishes	
Çorbacıoğlu, H.	2022	*Benim Süper Gücüm* (Tr)	Ketebe
		My Superpower (Eng)	
Şahin, S	2022	*Eşsiz Mavi* (Tr)	Masalperest
		Endless Blue (Eng)	
Arslan Akca, G.	2021	*Kırılan Kalpler Nereye Gider?* (Tr)	Timaş Çocuk
		Where Do Broken Hearts Go? (Eng)	
Birincioğlu, G.	2022	*Tonya'nın Fındıkkıran Balesi* (Tr)	İşbankası Yayınları
		Tonya's Nutcracker Ballet (Eng)	
Ersingn, Z.	2022	*Lori'nin Masalı* (Tr)	Kırmızı Kedi
		Lori's Story (Eng)	

metaphorical expressions, and second, they serve as materials and decorative objects. When thought, it can be easily guessed that the primary goal of the first is to develop the reading child's linguistic skills, although nothing can be said about the rationale behind the latter, especially as our current and urgent concern with environmental problems continues to grow.

Metaphors are commonly used in Turkish, as in many other languages. In the story, the expression "his nose turned tomato red" (p. 5) is a familiar Turkish phrase, similar to "The plant-legged girl shook her hair to the side and smiled" (p. 31), which compares legs to plants, implying they look skinny. Additionally, when asked how he is doing, Uncle Sabri responds, "As fine as a radish" (p. 38), a Turkish saying meaning good health. Throughout the story, plants are mentioned mainly for decoration and human consumption. For example, when talking about his dreams, a tree is mentioned merely as an object:

> If we win the jackpot, my room will be the first to be renovated. I want a tree-shaped bookcase with books and toys hanging from its branches. If we buy a house, we'll plant every fruit sapling in the garden (p. 17).

Similarly, when discussing the kite he wants to make, the protagonist claims it should be made of nylon rather than paper so that "it doesn't tear easily" (p. 25). Presenting the character with a choice between nylon and wood as materials reveals the author's lack of environmental awareness regarding the pollution caused by nylon. Additionally, using wood reduces the number of trees on Earth, further suggesting that the writer's main focus is telling the boy's story and his wishes, while overlooking various issues related to the biopolitics of our modern world.

The Dining Table Full of Vitamins (2022)

This story is about a grandmother who grows spinach on her farm. Plants are featured in the story for three reasons: to create metaphorical expressions, as materials and objects for decoration, and as food for human consumption. In the storyline, plants (spinach) appear as organisms that think and feel. First of all, the story is full of metaphors that use plants. For instance, the expression that describes the beauty and bountifulness of the dining table is stated as "One end of the table is in the mountains, and the other end is in the vineyard" (p. 3), which is a popular Turkish phrase that exaggerates the richness

of the food served on the table. Similarly, the story's ending follows a traditional narrative pattern that is popularly used to end the story, told by using the apple as a fruit that is sent to the readers/listeners by God to make their wishes come true:

> Three apples fell from the sky onto the table. One for the children who obeyed the table rules. One for those who cooked wonderful meals and served them to us. The third is for those who thanked the Creator of all blessings after the meal (p. 15).

As mentioned earlier, spinach is referenced in the storyline as a food for humans. The following sentences are written to categorize these plants as food:

> The vegetables were very delicious (p. 4),
>
> The spinach was delicious. It was said to be a vitamin boost for both the minds and bodies of the children (p. 8),
>
> One day, Aunt Hanım went to her field. Today was a significant day. They were coming to pick the newly grown vegetables. She went to her field and took a look at her spinach. With its green leaves, it looked rich in vitamins (p. 5),
>
> [To the spinach in the field] Oh my green children, you are so beautiful. Today you will go to your new homes. Now you will realize your dreams. You will become delicious food and spread your vitamins. (p. 6),
>
> The spinach was very happy. They were excited to go to their new homes. Some wanted to be a vitamin for a child's hair. Some couldn't wait to give strength to an athlete. (p. 6),
>
> The spinach trees were now very happy. Some of them were the strength of the child athlete, while others were the shine in other children's hair. Everything was perfect now. They gave the vitamins to the little children. (p. 14).

In the story, plants think and feel, as can be seen in this statement: "The spinach were very happy" (p. 6) and "While the spinach was thinking that they would be happy, a sad event happened" (p. 9). However, all the statements in which their feelings or thought processes are mentioned are considered beneficial for humans, as food. Hence, it can be seen that the plants portrayed are selfless creatures who have no worries other than being eaten by humans in a self-sacrificing manner. These results suggest that the existence of plants in the storyline has nothing to do with themselves, as their only concern is to be served on humans' dinner tables.

Frogs Who Sing Songs (2022)

Only in two instances are plant varieties mentioned in this children's book. In the first one, the description includes some information on how a plant grows:

> When the rain stopped, the Sun appeared with its rays. As it grew warmer, the earth, soaked with rainwater, took in the seeds it carried inside, and soon everything turned green. It became so lush that the brown of the earth was no longer visible. (p. 5)

Following this informative part, a "willow tree" is mentioned for decorative purposes as follows:

> Mr. Bowtie saw the note hanging on the willow tree and read:
> We could live together
> In happiness
> We all need each other
> You will understand that too
> If you regret one day
> We will wait for you at the small lake. (p. 5)

Manu's Heart (2020)

The story centers on Manu's experiences after a heart operation. He writes a letter to the Queen of the Land of Songs, and "She puts his letter in an envelope and sticks stamps made from autumn leaves on the envelope." This is the only part that mentions plants, albeit through images of dry leaves.

The Story of The Three Fishes (2021)

No plants are mentioned in the text, mainly because the story is set in an aquarium. However, it should be

noted that plants are naturally part of the aquarium environment and serve as a habitat, so aquatic plants could have been included in the text, even though the author chose not to.

My Superpower (2022)

Plant life is only briefly referenced in the story through the phrase "falling leaves" in the forest, which indicates the change of seasons.

Who Ate the Fruits? (2022)

The story uses different plants to build a setting that supports the plot and mentions various plants for all three purposes mentioned earlier. Statements like "A spider formed a web in a raspberry bush" and "All of a sudden, a wind blew, cherries on the tree started to fall" demonstrate how plants are used to create the setting, while statements like "He bought a pumpkin, walking home" and "He wanted a banana, so he picked one and ate it" show that plants are mainly used for food. Other statements also suggest that in the different mentions of the plants, the purpose is to imply that they are food.

> The hedgehog prepared pea soup for her children's dinner.
>
> He wanted a banana, so he selected one and ate it.
>
> The small mouse picked the cherries one at a time and ate them all.
>
> He was filling his stomach with the fruits from the orange tree right in the valley.
>
> He was very hungry and ate the carrot with a crunch.

In addition to these, in various parts of the story, statements signal that plants add onto the overall effect of the descriptions through which a fantastic world is created:

> Three plump elephants, wanting to cool off, climbed a lemon tree to pick some lemons and make lemonade, but when the branch snapped, all three fell to the ground. All the glasses and plates in the restaurant under the shrew's tree were broken.

Endless Blue (2022)

The story is about a sock named Blue that leaves home because of the wind while it was hanging to dry after being washed. A tree branch is mentioned only as scenery: "A small dog approached. It first sniffed Blue, then grabbed it in its mouth and threw it. Blue, thrown, clung to a tree branch" (p. 10).

Where Do Broken Hearts Go? (2021)

In the story, a girl learns that anyone whose heart is broken goes to the Land of the Broken Hearts, and she goes there. The only mention of plant life is in one part: "What were those trees made of clouds?" Therefore, although it appears that plants are used for decoration, this use is set within a fantasy context rather than implying anything about real plants.

Tonya's Nutcracker Ballet (2022)

The story revolves around a child's daily life in a rural town, as from the beginning, plants are used for decorative purposes and to move the readers' attention to the seasonal change:

> The hazelnut branches are now leafless and lonely because it's winter! But don't be fooled by their dry, withered branches. My grandfather nurtures our trees with hope. He fertilizes them so they'll bear hazelnuts. When spring comes, they'll blossom and wear their finest. Their branches will flourish, buds will bloom, and they'll be overflowing with lush green leaves. They'll wink at us with these long shoots. I call them hazelnut blossoms. I love the red tassels on their tops. (n.p.)

The text explains how plants grow, writing, "The hazelnuts will thirst, drink the rainwater to their heart's content, and feed on the sunlight. Their shells will gradually harden." However, as soon as they complete their growth, they become materials for human consumption:

> We don't throw away the shells. We use them as fertilizer, as they provide vitamins for our hazelnut trees. We burn them in stoves, which we call "Kino."

Apart from such usage, plants are merely depicted as food for human consumption. "The hazelnuts' insides are milky and white. It's too early to eat them."

Lori's Story (2022)

This is the only story in which plants are strongly depicted through metaphorical expressions. As one starts reading the text, they quickly see that plants are personified:

> Six-year-old Lori loved the birds, the yellow flowers, and the apricot cart in the yard. Her smile was light and airy like the pollen. Just like them, Lori made the place she was in beautiful. Lori always sang these cheerful songs that the birds and the wind whispered into the trees' ears. (p. 7)

The plants are often mentioned in scenes where human moods, especially happiness, are depicted. For instance, "Lory spent all summer playing games and singing merry songs under the shade of the trees" (p. 8). Even when the world stops in the storyline, suggesting a change in the mood from a positive to a negative one, plants appear through personification:

> While Lorry was listening carefully to the story, at its most exciting part, her grandmother suddenly stopped talking. All the sounds of that Autumn's night stopped talking as well. The frogs, the crickets, and the rustling leaves were all silent. This great silence stood still in the sky, as if a starry backdrop framed it. Her grandmother had forgotten the rest of the story. (p. 10)

Plants are also used for decoration purposes in the story, just like the other stories analyzed in this study: "Lori lived in a small house with an apricot tree on the roof and a dovecote in the courtyard" (p. 7) and "Just as her grandmother had forgotten to tell the fairy tales, she too had forgotten the song that the wind sang to the apricot tree" (p. 9).

Discussion

This study aimed to analyze selected children's books regarding how plants are represented, following the basic premises of the Phyto-analysis approach and drawing on critical theory. Accordingly, the analysis of these children's books revealed that plants were mainly represented for three purposes. First, for metaphorical expressions, decorative purposes as a part of the setting, and third, as food. Furthermore, from a phyto-analytical perspective, plants were mostly portrayed as human-centered resources or decorative motifs rather than as coequal agents in the words depicted in these children's books. These results suggest that the children's books analyzed in this study do not treat plants as active participants in human life, sharing all the natural elements with organic entities such as humans and animals, as well as inorganic ones, including geographical formations, minerals, rocks, and stones. Hence, it can be said that the content of these books falls short of fostering an eco-friendly world in which children can develop a solid understanding of ecocritical issues expected of future generations in the milieu in which we live. Because "children are capable of building deep connections if their learning environment supports spiritual moments in time, space, nature, relationships, and with big questions that take children beyond themselves" (Schein, 2014, p. 89), both classroom and free-time readings of materials should consider feeding and nurturing children's growth through such materials that treat all life forms in a detailed and in-depth manner rather. Hence, rather than children's books that are constructed by means of stereotypical expressions and shallow narrative lines that do not yield support for children's various development processes, materials that treat plant and animal lives as active agents should be more appropriate as instructional materials.

Regarding the visibility of plants in literary works (Petal 0), findings showed that various plant types were present and visible in these texts, yet anthropocentric portrayal still overwhelmingly dominates these children's books. That is to say, though plants are present, they are not positioned in these stories as the narrative locus. In line with this, in very few of the selected books, plants have an intrinsic voice (Petal 1). For instance, in The Dining Table Full of Vitamins, spinach is anthropomorphized (e.g., "The spinach was very happy"), while the plant is portrayed as an object for human benefit. In the great majority of the selected books, on the other hand, plants function as scenery or metaphor as they do not speak for themselves.

As a consequence of the anthropocentric portrayal of plants, which dominates the narrative voice and tone in the children's books analyzed, plants' agency is also limited in the selected books

(Petal 2). That is to say, plants are represented as acted upon (e.g., harvested, eaten, or turned into furniture) rather than as characters who meaningfully or critically interactively influence human affairs. Therefore, although plants were personified (Petal 3) in some of the selected texts (e.g., the spinach thinks or Lori's trees whispering songs), and thus have anthropomorphic characteristics, these characteristics are selectively used to reflect human emotions (e.g., happiness or helpfulness) rather than creating a real plant-centered perspective.

Another repercussion of such anthropocentric representation is evident when the selected books are analyzed under Petal 4: the plants in these stories are frequently portrayed in human-managed or domestic settings (e.g., gardens, dining tables, orchards), rather than in their natural environments. Only a very few exceptions could be detected in the selected texts (e.g., the rain-fed greening in Frogs Who Sing Songs), yet even in these examples, the plants' natural environments remain the backdrop. Therefore, in the selected stories, plants are shown as applicable yet replaceable parts of the décor, enriching and coloring the setting (Petal 5). Plants rarely play essential roles in the plot, and when they do, it is usually because they serve people (e.g., providing food or making a place look nice) rather than acting as partners or having power of their own. Therefore, in terms of the instrumental significance of plants (Petal 6), it can be said that they are often shown as food (e.g., as in The Dining Table Full of Vitamins and Who Ate the Fruits?), materials (e.g., a tree for a bookcase; stamps of autumn leaves), or metaphors (nose "tomato red"). Therefore, the selected children's books can be considered a reproduction of the anthropocentric discourse, aligning with the long tradition in children's literature that employs vegetal imagery for moral, decorative, or didactic ends (Petal 7).

CONCLUSION

Applying the Phyto-analytical approach to selected contemporary Turkish children's books revealed that plants are visible but not empowered in these works, primarily functioning as metaphors, food sources, decorative elements, or human utilities. As Reynolds (2011) notes, "There is apparently no limit to the kind of moral dilemmas currently posed by contemporary children's literature" (p. 124). However, in the analyzed texts, neither the characters nor the plants depicted exhibit any moral dilemmas. Hence, it can be argued that the selected works from contemporary Turkish children's storybooks tend to depict human, plant, and animal lives for simple narrative purposes, without offering readers ecological awareness or storylines that explore all aspects of life on earth in depth. This points to a continuum of a "reading crisis" (Plotka, 2025, Article 3) in children's education, in which literacy skills, as researchers have found, decline as children progress through formal education.

In line with these findings, several implications are suggested. First of all, exposure to children's books may help students develop an eco-centric rather than an anthropocentric perspective. As the findings showed, plants are frequently represented as food sources, decorative elements, metaphors, or resources for human use rather than as living entities with intrinsic value. Therefore, from an eco-pedagogical perspective, students exposed to these books or similar works should also be encouraged to examine how human-nature relationships are portrayed to recognize, at a fundamental level, anthropocentric notions and representations. Given that the findings indicated a passive role for plants rather than active agents, teachers should be meticulous in their selection process and choose books in which plants actively influence or shape events, ecosystems influence human conditions or decisions, and human and nonhuman characters are shown together as interconnected participants.

Although children's literature provides various opportunities for teachers, parents, and students, it should be noted that carefully selected reading materials also require the planning and using of instructional activities, which should facilitate students to investigate local plant species, to observe ecosystems in the schoolyard or their neighborhood, to examine relationships between plants, animals, and humans, and, more importantly, discuss environmental challenges that negatively influence local biodiversity. Such an approach helps teachers transform the reading process into a meaningful form

of praxis and reflection. While doing that, children's creativity should be fostered by encouraging them "to come up with alternative ends or solutions to problems in a story by posing questions such as "What else can you do?" or "What would you have done?" (Plotka, 2025, Article 3). Hence, critical questions should be prepared by the stakeholders who use these books with children, so that children can process the content in creative but responsible ways.

It should be noted that these findings cannot be generalized, as this study is limited to the analysis of the selected books. There is a need for further studies to deepen and enrich this analysis in two directions: (1) comparative studies with texts that explicitly center plant agency and (2) closer attention to how exposure to such readings influences children's vegetal and environmental perceptions. From another angle, because teachers' "Problem detection and book selection depended on the academic and intellectual background and personal effort" and "who were more interested in and knowledgeable of children's literature chose better books with greater impact on students" (Şen, 2021, p. 2042), it is advisable that teachers and writers, both of children's books as well as instructional ones, be informed about all aspects of children's books and other instructional materials to transform their students into responsible citizens with well-developed thinking and evaluative skills that we need today and for the future. Likewise, as contemporary parents read aloud appropriate text to their children (Saracho, 2026), they should also be aware of the givens of the world in which we live, hence, finding appropriate children's books for their children should be a concern for them for the benefit of their children as well as the world in which they may live in their following years. Studies like ours can help parents consider the content of the books they read to their children.

In conclusion, future research should also examine the extent to which reading children's books shapes the worldviews of students who engage with these materials. Longitudinal studies are especially needed to examine the literacy development of children who read these and other books and to understand the effects of these materials on children's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual skills.

Ethical Issues

This study does not require ethical approval, as it does not involve human participants or data derived from human participants.

Conflict of Interest

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