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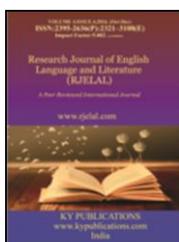
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ECO-CRITICISM IN THE WRITINGS OF RUSKIN BOND

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ABSTRACT

Environment is the key concern of the contemporary world. Ecocriticism is a mode of literary criticism that aims to study the connection between Ecology and Literature. Creative writers and the academia are linked with this major issue. Ruskin Bond is one of the most popular contemporary short story writers of recent times. He resides in Mussoorie, at the foothills of the Himalayas. The region is blessed with an abundance of natural beauty, flora and fauna. Bond is anxious about the depletion of the natural environment at the cost of urbanization and commerce. His concerned anxiety is reflected in his short stories. Painted with love, his pure, innocent characters portray his love for nature; they interact with animals, trees and flowers; they reflect his concern and his effort to preserve the environment through tree plantation; the tales highlight the memorable presence of his grandfather as an ardent environmentalist; the beauty and allure of the hills and tigers haunts him; and above all his stories inspire in the reader a sense of duty and responsibility to the environment.

Key words: Environment; Ecocriticism; Nature; Reciprocity; Urbanization, Mission.

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INTRODUCTION

Bond was born on May 19, 1934 at Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh. He is the eldest son of late Aubrey Alexander Bond, a British officer in Royal Air Force in India. His sister Ellen was a little handicapped child with defective vision and initial signs of epilepsy. Ellen lived with Granny (Grandmother) and brother William at Calcutta, but Bond grew-up in Jamnagar (Gujarat), Dehradun and Simla. He is the most popular and sensitive contemporary short story writer of our times. He wrote his first short story, "The Untouchable" in 1950, when he was just sixteen years old. Now he has to his credit more than five hundred short stories, a few novellas, novels, essays and children's books. His first novel, A Room on the Roof, written when he was seventeen, won him the John

Llewellyn Rhys Memorial prize in 1957. His most popular novels are Vagrants in the Valley, Delhi is Not Far, and A Flight of Pigeons. A Flight of Pigeons was made into the well acclaimed film, Junoon. He has received the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1993, and the Padma Shri in 1999. He has recently been honoured with the Padma Bhushan. He loves the hills and most of his works are set in the natural beauty of the foothills of the Himalayas.

On the blurb of Dust on the Mountains, Collected Stories by Ruskin Bond, a quote from the Tribune says,

Ruskin Bond's stories bring to life the special flavours of life in the hill. He strengthens the "Rudyardian thesis" that the smell of the Himalayas, if it once creeps into the blood of a man, he will return to

the hills again and again and will love to live and die among them.

His short stories are wonderful portrayals of India and Indians. His canvas is wide, his depth unfathomable, and the heights he scales in the vignettes he paints are immeasurable. He displays a deep rooted attachment to the simple men and women he portrays. They are very real and painted with a genuine sense of love and sympathy. The town of Dehradun is the backdrop against which his characters struggle and achieve their dreams and destiny. Nature, in the form of hills, mountains, streams, rivers, trees, birds and animals is very close to Bond's heart, and he relates to them with intensity.

The short story is a genre that demands a precise compactness in the structure of plot, a focused clarity in characterization, an intensity of the thematic concern, and an allure in the story. The short story writer has to convey a meaning, an aesthetic joy, and a comment on the human condition in very few words.

Bond short stories are in the first person narration, involving his father and grandfather. His stories inspire love for the environment, and concern for its protection in the reader. On his return to India, he preferred to settle down in the small sleepy town, Dehra, and said good-bye to the rush and tumult of Delhi. He decided to eke his living from freelance writing but soon it proved a very tough task in the mercenary world.

RUSKIN BOND'S THEMATIC CONCERNS WITH NATURE:

Nature is a major thematic occupation in Bond's short stories. He shows the great affinity between trees and men. It is not simply a matter of nature description as a narrative technique, but a genuine feeling for the natural world, which has it somewhat of a Wordsworth in quality about it.

There is a great affinity between trees and men. We grow at much the same pace, if we are not hurt or starved or cut down. In our youth we are resplendent creatures, and in our declining years we stoop a little, we remember, we stretch our brittle limbs in the sun, and then, with a sigh, we shed our last leaves. (Bond : 1988 : 103-104).

Mahmood Ali, the kitemaker, in the story "The Kitemaker" speaks of the inseparable relationship between man and nature. The analogy of man and tree gives the total essence of Ruskin Bond's treatment of nature, is very familiar to all of us. The writers have approached nature according to their mental make-up and the life around them. Some fall in love with her external beauty, whereas some are keen to learn from one impulse of vernal wood. Very few like Bond seek delight in running with the winds, smiling with the flowers and conversing with the trees. Most of the writers are satisfied with mere description of nature, with a mere external view of her beauties. While Bond does not regard nature as a mere background but as a wonderful power that influences our souls. He allows the bird and the flowers the tree and the river to speak and convey their own messages. He possesses not only sight, but also insight. He not only sees things clearly and accurately, but also penetrates in to the hearts of things and always finds some meaning in them. Nothing is ugly or commonplace in this world. Everywhere he recognizes personality in nature. From his earliest childhood has a great regard for the streams and hills. The flowers and stars have been his companions. When his thoughts became nature, he believed that the nature is the reflection of the living God.

Bond makes a wonderful use of all these. Most of his stories are in the first person narrative, involving his father and grandfather. His stories inspire love for the environment, and concern for its protection in the reader.

Ruskin Bond's short stories run close to the above ethos. He has been called a writer who celebrates nature, and also wants to warn his readers about the threats to the environment caused by industrialization, urbanization and commercialization. He has spent his entire life in India, in Dehradun and the hills of Uttarakhand. In an Interview with Amita Aggarwal, he says, "Problems of deforestation, pollution, and environmental decay of wildlife have been the subject matter of most of my stories and essays." Man lives close to nature in certain places, as Bond says in his Book of Nature.

The most ancient texts of Hindus have reverent mention of the powers of nature. During the Vedic age, it was nature that was worshipped. The Rig Veda is a testament to these beliefs. Most of the verses are tributes to nature. Man was wonder-struck by the universe and its incomprehensible power and beauty. There is a deep reverence for Bond or web in which man lives. The panchmahabhutas, or tatwas, that is, the Earth, Air, Water, Fire and space are elements of prakriti. The web enfolds within itself flora, fauna and man. Life flourishes exuberantly and abundantly in an ambient atmosphere where there is a deep interconnectedness. Hindus worshipped the sun and the moon, many trees and animals, the changing weather conditions and the seasons, and the power of thunder, lightening, rain, the rivers and the seas. They prayed to these powers and called them the heirs of the Gods. There is a deep spirituality in nature. The epics and all the holy scriptures of India are full of invocations to the myriad powers of nature. Man and Nature share a deep bond. Hindus believe in the concept of VasudevKutumbhakam, that is, the whole world is one family. Nature and religion share a close knit bond. It is with a feeling of love and awe that Indians view nature.

Bond is the ultimate environmentalist, growing up so in Dehra, with a father and grandfather who are close to nature and want to protect both plant and animal life. Planting trees are necessary, and it is the moral duty of man to nurture this love of trees and impart it to their children. This is going beyond one's own garden, and beautifying the world at large, and creating shelter for birds, butterflies and animals, is the largesse that Bond gives out to the world.

In "Death of the Trees", Bond writes sadly of the building of roads by the PWD, and the ruthless felling of trees he loves, the maple, the deodar, the pines, the oaks. He bemoans the flight of beautiful forest birds, the magpies, the Barbet, the Minivet and others, as their shelters and homes are destroyed. The sound of dynamite has scared away the other animals too. He ends, "Never mind. Men come and go, the mountains remain." (461)

In "The Coral Tree", Bond paints a sensitive picture of teaching a child to plant and nurture a tree, Bond and love that then develops and lasts forever. He also shows the tree's tenacity to survive against all odds. The story, "When You can't Climb Trees Any More", Bond goes back to the home of his childhood and a young girl quickly climbs the old jackfruit tree and retrieves a medal he had hidden there more than twenty five years ago. Life, love, childhood all goes on endlessly, and memories remain, sharp and vivid. The tree has kept his precious childhood tokens safe amidst its bosom.

CONCLUSION:

Ruskin Bond as an agitated and concerned writer, highlights the issues of environment. Bond made the short story simple but lofty. The short story ceased to be merely a means of common entertainment. It became a study of the inner working of the minds and hearts of characters. He believed that every work of art should have a moral significance. He regards not religion but the moral law as the basis of human society. Persons who do not maintain a high standard of morality are ruined.

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