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AN ECOCRITICAL EXPLORATION OF RUSKIN BOND'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES*

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ABSTRACT

The development of modern civilization endows humans with all amenities. The gradual urbanisation unfolds many opportunities and makes life more comfortable. But at the same time it snatches away the beauty of the green world making life prone to various diseases, and resulting in the jeopardy of ecological balance. Ecocriticism has turned a new vista in re-evaluating our attitude towards the world. It focuses on the shift from anthropocentric to biocentric attitude as major critics of ecocriticism accentuate. Ruskin Bond (b.1934) has performed a major role in arousing environmental and ecological concerns through his plethora of literary creations. He delineates the harmonious coexistence of man and nature in his oeuvre, where panthers and humans live in mutual trust, where the unnoticed objects of natural world have their significant roles to perform in the exquisite design of God. In today's world of mass urbanisation and industrialisation Bond's works hammer home a very suggestive note:

Do we stop all development in the name of preserving the environment?

Or do we move on regardless? *Proceed with caution* would be rational person's answer. But are human beings really rational? (Rain 236)

This paper focuses on re-evaluating Bond's short stories with the lens of ecocriticism.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Ecology, Environment, Ruskin Bond, Urbanisation, Industrialisation.

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Urbanisation has opened numerous opportunities before us. We can avail the advantages of modern technologies residing in urban areas which cannot be possible for the inhabitants of rural areas. But if unplanned urbanisation takes place in rapid pace the ecological system of our earth will soon degrade. It leads to gradual deforestation, pollution in water, soil and air. If urbanisation is necessary for modern world, it is more important to preserve the environment, so that we can lead a more healthy and meaningful life.

Ecological crisis is the burning problem of the modern era with which social workers, NGOs, policymakers of the government, literary artists, and all are mostly preoccupied. In an urban society industrial pollution is the greatest threat to humans. Increased level of carbon dioxide and global warming are the curses of modern world. The results of ecological imbalance may be very alarming and formidable in future. The possible consequences are flooding, desertification, famine, eco-wars over decaying resources and many more. It is an

acknowledged fact that modern technology has shown us unprecedented material prosperity, but it enables us so at the cost of the onslaught upon the green world.

In literature ecocritics has performed a pivotal role fostering literary artists in transmitting values of profound ecological undertones. Ecocriticism is the study of relationship between the physical environment and literature. Richard Kerridge opines:

Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint. Texts are evaluated in terms of their environmental implications. Ecocritics analyse the history of concepts such as 'nature', in an attempt to understand the cultural ecological crisis (Waugh, *Literary Theory* 530).

There is more often than not an environmental implication inherent in the texture of the stories of Ruskin Bond. If M.R. Anand is the champion for the socially marginalized, Raja Roy registers the philosophical insight in his work, Anita Desai unfolds the psychological dimensions of humans, it is undoubtedly Ruskin Bond who in his exotic short stories and novels exposes the blunder of modern man in the annihilation of the nature. The scholars as well as critics who labelled Bond only as a writer of children fiction probably overlooked the fact that what Sundarlal Bahuguna as an environmentalist has done very few writer of India like Ruskin Bond evoke such universal concerns of ecology and environment in literature. The key concepts of ecocriticism lie in its penchant for our ethical commitment towards nature and interdependence between humans and natural world. It stresses our ethical rectification towards nature. Bond pronounces about his deep concern about mother earth:

I am told that this entire region is "eco-fragile" . . . I should think most of our earth is "eco-fragile" having had to put up with hundreds of thousands of years of human civilization (*Rain* 236).

So, Bond often hints at our ethical reassessment towards nature. Ruskin Bond is an ardent admirer of nature. His traumatic childhood – his mother's separation from his father and his father's sad demise at an early age of the author – finds its refuse in the soothing lap of nature. Nature always rejuvenates the writer and also liberally renders the source material for his writings. To evaluate Bond in the light of ecocriticism it would be pertinent to trace out his relationship with nature. Nature is not only a decorum for his artistic purpose, it is a perennial source of inspiration, "a guardian spirit in his loneliness and a transcendental celestial existence in the later period which culminates in his humanism with the world of flora and fauna"(Sen,176), and finally it is " his religion" (Pathak) also. In today's world of mass urbanisation and industrialisation Bond's works lead us to the alleys of vernal wood, or to a pristine meadow where we can take a lungful of fresh air, or to a little hamlet where panthers and humans are not in rancor with each other. His deep understanding of the natural world lies in his empathy towards it. Like a biologist he is not a detached observer of nature. He perceives the natural world with his senses as it is evident from the following observation of the author:

And I would thank my God for leaves and grass and the smell of things, the smell of mint and myrtle and bruised clover, and the touch of things ,the touch of grass and air and sky, and the touch of the sky's blueness (*Rain* 96-97).

Hence the author relishes the smell, sound and touch of the natural world with his sensory perception. The plunder of natural resources and green world in the name of industrialisation always gives pain to the author. Love for natural world has been his cardinal theme right from the beginning of his literary career. He visualises that the harmony of nature pervades all creatures, beautiful and ugly, great or insignificant. Amita Aggarwal rightly asserts:

The fleeting shades of light and dark, the mist mantled peaks and the soft buffs of breeze stimulate his senses, transcend him

to that sphere where he becomes a part of the phenomenon. His window is always open to welcome a little bird, a homesick vine or the fragrance of rain drenched earth

(*Ruskin Bond: The Writer Saint* 34).

Ecocriticism as a critical theory is the developing branch of literary studies, and it gained momentum in the early nineties. Lawrence Buell, in his outstanding book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau Nature Writing and Formation of American Culture* highlights that in an environmentally oriented work human history is inherent in nonhuman natural history, the text's particular focus is on the human's accountability to the environment (7-8). Ecocritics always emphasise to conceive deeply about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dangers formed by the environmental crisis and they as well as show how literature and language can render pivotal values of inherent ecological concerns. Ruskin Bond's short stories are resonant with the voices of the green world. Every tiny object of nature is flamboyant with its own glory in the works of Ruskin Bond. He feels a presence of kindred spirit in the world of flora and fauna, and he feels so because of his total empathy with the natural world. The analogy between man and tree in his remarkable short story " Kitemaker" will show how Bond's humanism is all pervasive:

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 resplend-

ent creatures, and in our declining years we too stoop a little, we remember,

we, stretch our brittle limbs in the sun, and then, with a sigh, we shed our last

leaves (*Night* 103- 104).

Here kitemaker Mahmood Ali in the story speaks of the inseparable relationship between man and nature.

In the story "The Cherry Tree", Bond sketches how little boy Rakesh's love for the cherry tree forms a ecosystem in a miniature form. The boy protagonist lives with his grandfather who is also a

lover of trees. One day Rakesh plants a cherry seed and after few days becomes mesmerised seeing that the seed germinates into a sapling. Both Rakesh and the tree grow along. Gradually there appear flowers in the tree and it is laden with fruits. In the due course insects, bees and birds find shelter in the tree just like Rakesh and his grandfather who rest under the cooling shadow of the tree. Here through his boy protagonist Bond projects an environmental consciousness among his readers. Bond here beautifully sketches the cohabitation of nature and man. "Dust on the Mountain" depicts the horrible picture of ruthless destruction of the green world . Man's callousness towards the environment is exposed in this story. Bisnu pursuing for his livelihood as well for sustaining his family comes to Mussoorie, and is taken aback by the gradual holocaust of the trees .Industrialisation has turned the life sustaining nature into dust and contamination. When Bisnu and Chittru look at the mountain they find that the top of it is blasted away by dynamite to get limestone rock. Every object of nature – birds, grasshoppers, butterflies, grass – perishes. However the story ends with an optimistic note, when Pritam Singh who is always preoccupied with material gain perceives the life saving prowess of trees when his truck is saved by an oak tree from an impending accident. The author conveys a very cognizant note of the preservation of environment through the words of Bisnu :

I will work on my land. It's better to grow things on the land, than to blast things out of it (Bond, "Dust" 502).

"My Father's Trees in Dhera" recounts Bond's planting excursion with his father. When little Bond protested seeing his father planting saplings between the trees in the forest that no one would come on that way to see them, his father replied that someone might come on that way in future. Through his father's reply the author accentuates his profound concern of environment:

If people keep cutting trees, instead of planting them, there'll be soon no forests left at all and the world will be just one vast desert (*Night Train* 145).

His father died. Years passed. When Bond returned to that forest after a long absence, virtually as a stranger, for there were a very few relatives of Bond then in Dehra, he found that a number of parrots, and koel birds came to live in his father's planted trees, which as if hailed the author with a cordial note. So, Bond thought that in some remoter and serene corner of earth his father's dream came true. The author here mixes memories with a subtle note of ecology.

In the Story "Panther's Moon", Bond points out through the protagonist Bisnu how deforestation and the malevolent hunters cause great jeopardy in the lives of animals like panther. Bisnu at the end of the story observes that they have no threat from the man-eater but from the hunters who try to shoot it and the man-eater becomes incompetent to run fast to catch deers, and as a result it attacks humans. So, the harmonious coexistence of man and natural world is destroyed by the greed of man. He mirrors before us that as much as man needs land, a tiger needs forest, for in this earth each object has its right to survive.

Ruskin Bond more prominently conveys an obnoxious picture of deforestation in "Death of the Trees". Bond exposes here how the greedy nature of humans affects nature as well as the animal world:

The explosions that continually shatter the silence of the mountains- as thousand-year-old rocks are dynamited- have frightened away all but the most intrepid of birds and animals. Even the bold langours haven't shown their faces for over a fortnight (*Dust* 461).

The catastrophic act of the PWD contaminates the pristine beauty and serenity of the mountain. Bond here calls forth for the ethical reassessment of humans towards nature.

"The Leopard" is a story in which the author portrays the extinction of the rare species like leopard. The hunters create an environment of mistrust between man and animal world by their hunting expeditions. The narrator speculates: "But did the leopard, trusting one man, make the mistake

of bestowing his trust on others? ("Leopard", 263) In this story the author emphasises the coexistence of man and nature. Bond gives a very apt message that nature has two faces, one benevolent and the other alarming. The author firmly believes that who goes with nature always survives, but if one adversely manipulates natural world it will avenge him in long run. In the story "Sita and the River", Sita and her grandfather do not exploit nature for their own interests. They depend on nature only for their survival. When the river is violent with flood Sita survives clinging to the peepul tree which knows her very well:

The tree was her friend. It had known her all these years, and now it held her in its old and dying arms. . . . (*Sita* 189)

Bond's short stories have sincere concerns about nature and ecology. He is not against urbanisation or industrialisation, but man should proceed in this direction with cautious deliberation for it is nature which can endow man a meaningful and healthy existence which the author implicitly suggests. I think Bond has created a landmark in his writings in raising environmental and ecological consciousness which are very pertinent in today's world when our mother earth is in peril.

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