



An ecocritical study of Ruskin Bond's select stories

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Abstract

Ecocriticism calls for shifting attitudes from anthropocentric interests to biocentric interests. It documents a writer's deep association with and the endless impressions that destruction of our ecology has occasioned. The works effectively and successfully bring about environmental awareness on the moral and spiritual level. The distortion of the quaint beauty around us is interwoven consciously into an ecocritical work. An ecocritic has an eye - far reaching and penetrating, a foresight that warns the readers about the impending devastation that man's ruthlessness has propositioned. The intellectual energy of such writers and their profound artistic dedication guides us to a wondrous interplay of provincial and private being translated into enduring universal concerns.

Keywords: ecocritical, Ruskin Bond's, stories, ecocriticism

Introduction

'What is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies' [1].

Ecocriticism calls for shifting attitudes from anthropocentric interests to biocentric interests. It documents a writer's deep association with and the endless impressions that destruction of our ecology has occasioned. The works effectively and successfully bring about environmental awareness on the moral and spiritual level. The situations and characters caught up in worldly complexities are gradually weaned away from the hazards of materialism to sublime benevolence of nature. The distortion of the quaint beauty around us is interwoven consciously into an ecocritical work. An ecocritic has an eye - far reaching and penetrating, a foresight that warns the readers about the impending devastation that man's ruthlessness has propositioned. The intellectual energy of such writers and their profound artistic dedication guides us to a wondrous interplay of provincial and private being translated into enduring universal concerns. The most hackneyed ecological troubles and views of the day are revitalized by their genius. Ecocriticism, today, has become a buzzword within and without academic circles all over the world focusing on its practical objective of environmental awareness. But such works can only stir one's mind without making a long lasting impression. It is only the creative writings of great authors and their emotional appeal that can influence the readers into establishing a spiritual discourse with nature. The literary community has even stepped in by recognizing 'ecocriticism' as a distinct branch of criticism. Many poets, novelists and story writers have shown a strong distaste for the advancing tide of modern materialism and deification of machines by

evincing their concern and genuine compassion through their art.

As Richard Keridge puts it, 'The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental cries' [2].

Though my paper proposes to explore the ecocritical aspect of Ruskin Bond's multifarious stories he has himself never made any conscious and compelling effort to belong to the rich coterie of well meaning ecocritics. It seems as if he has never striven hard to drive home any environmental concerns. Ecocriticism has just very incidentally smuggled into the rich texture of his impassioned work. The ethical framework of social responsibility and welfare or addressing ecological concerns hardly crossed his mind.

An artist's mental makeup is basically governed by his early formative years and also by the spirit of the age. So subjectivity is the natural feature of Bond's exquisite and integrated works of art. His subjectivity has emerged as his forte to drive readers into a world of verisimilitude. The young Bond's lonely life was replete with struggles, setbacks, failures and tragedies but it was his optimism that saw him establishing a relationship with Nature itself. The heavenly landscape compensated the emotional vacuum and helped him out of his sorrow. The person who introduced him to the vastness of the nature was his father from whom he imbibed love and respect for nature. In the stories like *My Father's trees in Dehra*, *When You Can't Climb Trees Any More*, *A Job Well Done* and *Coming Home to Dehra* he imagines his father coming back to life through new shoots. The story *The Funeral* though completely imaginative, gives a moving account of his father's death. Mourners expressing stereotyped sympathy, priest's cold voice and the coffin going deep into

the entrails of the earth and ghastly-silence spread around, cast a depressing impact on the boy who could hardly understand it. Now nature emerges as a great healing force to dissipate his gloom and loneliness. The innocent boy imagines eluding death with the help of nature. Perhaps he would grow into a tree and escape that way! ‘ If ever I am put away like this, thought the boy, I’ll get into the root of a plant and then I’ll become a flower and then, may be, a bird will come and carry my seed away....’ [3].

Through a number of young protagonists in his stories he recalls the planting excursions with his father on the slopes of Dehra. These excursions were enough to nurture an environmentalist and a great nature lover. After the tragic demise of his father the plants and trees hovered around like a guardian spirit. They were the guardians of his conscience who watched over his day to day life. Nature compensated for all the emotional support that a parentless child missed. The greens emerge as an immense healing force that dissipated the overpowering sense of solitariness. One cannot overlook it merely as a child’s fanciful idea when the boy imagines eluding death by getting into some root of a plant and then growing into flowers and seeds. Nature acts as a therapist to ease the boy of his grievances. Every response of his to nature is instinctive as is visible in one of his verses-

Like the rain, I sing.
Like the leaves, I dance.
Like the earth, I am still.
And in this, lord, I do they will [4].

Nature is the only deity and the universe is the manifestation of her force. Early impression of his childhood spent in Mussoorie, Shimla and Dehradun flow in his blood. The place and the environs in which he breathes cast a lingering impact on him. The early liaison with the hills transcended into his poems, essays and sketches. The mysterious silence of the nights and the dew dappled dawns temper his genuine enthusiasm for the beauty of the external nature with an awareness of its innate mystery and strangeness. In spite of facing all odds in his young life he held strongly the values of life. It is his integrity to life and his vocation that springs out of his deep connect to the hills. He upholds his beliefs with boldness and frankness. The Himalayas for him are a symbol of eternity and universal belongingness. The invincible mountains stand in all magnanimity reminding man of his own undaunting spirit. The Himalayas have exuded deep emotive influence upon the impressionable tablet of his psychology. The nature acts as a great reservoir of primeval innocence, so evident in his character and art. In *Mother Hill*, the narrator says –

‘When you have received love from people and the freedom that only mountains can give, then you have come very near the borders of Heaven.’ [5]

Dehradun and Mussoorie where young Bond grew up serve as a favourite backdrop and lend a lilting charm of its landscapes, bazaars and roads to his plots. Both the places have with their divine splendour cast their motherly love on Bond. He dreams of having a garden of his own, “I suppose it was this garden of my childhood that implanted in my mind the permanent vision of a perfect garden, so that whenever I am worried or down in

the dumps, I close my eyes and conjure up a picture of this lonely place; it does help to soothe an agitated mind; I would not call it meditation, contemplation rather.’ [5].

Nature is a major thematic occupation whence he shows great affinity between trees and men. Most of the writers since time immemorial have sought perennial source of inspiration from the beauty and mystery of nature but Bond can perceive a wonderful pulsating power because of his proximity to the wondrous splendour of the living world around during his formative years. Bond does not regard nature as a mere background but recognizes a personality in nature. He breathes through her and writes for her. His romance with nature goes on renewing with every passing day. His earnestness to harmonize his own self with her guided him to a winter garden, a cherry tree in Maplewood, a hidden pool, a wayside teashop, a small railway platform or village scenes. Bond effortlessly glides under the benevolence of nature that grants him welcoming themes and reliable backgrounds for his stories. He turns to the inexhaustive treasure of nature for revitalizing and refreshing him for the exhausting process of creativity. The freshness and innocence of flowers and birds brought about a rejuvenating energy prompting him into profuse creative excellence. The ravines, slopes, valleys and brooks were his family. The more deeply he scrutinized her processes the more complex and bewildering she became. He was always intrigued by the illusory and fleeting essence of nature. His principal response to nature was a fascination because of its continual change. But what Bond sees he sees clearly. The pragmatism of seeing the world as it is never deluded him. Because of a unique apprehension of nature, Bond was never a recipient of only external sensations as she cast a moral and elevating influence also.

It was a lifelong romance and easy intimacy with nature that accorded him a sense of being and an acute moral sensitivity. His lifelong dalliance with the purity and innocence planted seeds of sympathy in him. Even his characters are drawn from the humble section of society that lives in close association with nature. They are farmers, shopkeepers, chowkidars, gardeners, retired persons etc. There is Binya who runs after her cow, there is Neelu, holding a blue umbrella and there is Dukhi weeding and pruning the garden. His stories are not books printed on paper but worlds full of real living and breathing people. His first hand knowledge of the joys and pains of ordinary folks helped him depict the characters in all sincerity.

Binsu, who confronts the man-eater panther in the village Manjari, Sita who devises her sports around the old banyan tree, Kishan Singh who drives out the wild beast from the tunnel and Somi’s mother who nurtures her small garden of sweet peas and roses are some of his favourite characters. There are some other memorable characters although not born in the hills but have fallen in love with nature. Rusty, Mr. Pettigrew, Miss Mackenzie have an instinctive association and ardent faith in nature. Similar is Bond’s close intimacy with animals, birds and insects. He is perhaps the only writer to have woven wild life so earnestly in the texture of his stories – Niranjan Mohanty observes.

‘Bond has humanized the world of nature to consecrate his own joy in the living. Bonds’ love for insects and animals that make their living under the fostering care of nature

strengthens his tie with nature and his understanding of it. He realizes that these animals and insects form a part and parcel of nature' [6].

It is fascinating to know how man and beast have adopted themselves respecting each other's mode of existence. Several of his stories offer a Faithful account of human encounters with animals and birds. In his story *Crow for all Seasons*, the crow's honest confession, "how much we depend on humans" reveals the law of interdependence in nature. In some stories Bond almost elevates beasts and birds as heroes. The story *All Creatures Great and Small* revolves around a python enamored with its own reflection in a mirror like a true artist foreseeing an imaginative drama of feelings and responses in all their seeming triviality. Bond is charmed by the tiny creatures like butterflies, caterpillars, squirrels, lizards, leeches and all the insignificant bugs and ants.

But Ruskin Bond never corroborated the blind deification or adoration of nature. He also acknowledges the fury of nature as much as he celebrates the latent benevolence. Floods, droughts heat waves and storms also form an integral part of our world. He very sympathetically portrays his characters struggling consistently in order to survive the dangers of the raging weather. In one of his interviews Bond says:

"I am close to the nature for the last forty years. In my fiction there is struggle with nature. Those who go with nature always survive such as - the girl Sita in the story *Sita and the River* and Bisnu in *Panther's Moon*. I believe that nature has both faces - gentle and destructive, but it is the gentle face that dominates, I have shown as nature really is" [7]. Bond assuringly portrays the wild expanses, colossal features of nature, the strange fears and also the elation associate with it. Nature pronounces in whispers and he quite makes it out.

Nature's peace gradually flows as sunshine flows into the landscape. We realize that wildness is a necessity. He understands nature not in his mind but in his heart. It answered as increasing imaginative need in him. She kept him continuously wanting to know more, sense more grow more. It was never a sense of solitude that he experienced. Nature was his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change.

It is the benevolent force of nature that pervades as the destructive side is only transient. His characters are never lost in the vastness of the wilderness but rather emerge triumphant strengthened with the experiences with nature.

The Shivalik mountains are his sole passion and through his protagonists he articulates his first love with consummate artistry. "That probably sums it all up. Time passes and yet it doesn't pass; people come and go, the mountains remain. Mountains are permanent things. They are stubborn, they refuse to move you can blast holes out of them for their mineral wealth, strip them of their trees are foliage, or dam their streams and divert their currents. You can make tunnels and roads and bridges; but no matter how hard they try, humans cannot actually get rid of mountains. That's what I like about them; they are here to stay" [8]. the mountains are the cathedrals where he practiced religion and they seemed to kindle a rapt religious consciousness. Mountains beckoned him with a sort of magnetic pull. The secret of the mountains is that they simply exist. We realize that when he is in mountains they are in him filling every pore and cell of his. The mountains in fact challenge our conviction that the world

has been made for humans. They do not respond to the humanly arranged and controlled scientific gadgets but have their own rhythms and orders of existence.

The mountains retain their magnitude and primitive force so long as they are not spoiled by the greed of our 'civilization'. Endless consumerism has sent city dwellers on an endless destructive spree. Enslaved by gross materialism the glitter of mountains has prompted their tragic exodus to the hills. It's a nightmare that has turned life into an evil useless game. He is distracted from the true bliss of the hills when people from plains raid the hills they defile the plentiful land. Most of the city dwellers turn to the hills for greed; while the natives migrate to cities in search of livelihood. The hero too in the story finds himself lost in the concrete jungle when he is in search of identity in the midst of worldly complexities. The tranquility and spiritual bliss in the innocent hearts makes them nostalgic. The specific cultural and physical topography of the hills is infinitely healing and assuring. The hills speak a language of real life. The mountains never betray the hill people. The calls of the birds and beasts manifest their character. The mountains are their guardian and nurse. "I should have known that hill man doesn't disappear altogether, the spirit haunted rocks don't leave their people Wander too far, lest they lose forever" [9]. The story *From Small Beginnings* guides us into showing compassion to embrace all living creatures and bring solace in all our troubles and to renew the inexplicable connectedness. The story beckons us to a society where none intrudes. The hero in *The Last Tonga Ride* returns to his old paternal house to revive his relationship with the tree. Its friendly touch even after the lapse of many decades replenishes his heart. 'As I climbed it seemed as though someone was helping me. Invisible hands, the hands of the spirit in the tree, touched me and helped me climb' [10].

But in the city the sober colouring and elemental joys are lost. Conversely city dwellers are corrupted by the selfish materialistic motives raiding the mountains and usurping them of their pristine wholesomeness. The narrator has soulfully related the death of trees to the painful death of his own brother in an accident.

'It was just coming into its own this year, now cut down in its prime youth like my young brother on the road to Delhi last month: both victims of roads, the tree killed by PWD, my brother by a truck' [11].

The story *Dust on the Mountains* narrates how money mongers lure the Himalayan simpletons. The story gradually unravels the sordid picture of the green massacre damaging the quietude for their interest.

'There were trees here once, but the contractors took the deodars for furniture. And the pines were tapered to death for resin and the oaks were stripped to their leaves to feed cattle' [12].

The relationship of man and tree is revealed through the ancient belief, "A blessing rests on the house where falls the shadow of the tree". Trees need our attention and care but as soon as they bloom they provide us with shade and comfort in all situations of life. Dr Taylor in the story *Panther's Moon* attended her patients only after attending to her plants. She said;

"There was a lot between people ailing and plants ailing." [13]. The simple sensory delights derived from living in nature's

proximity always culminate into real humanism. When we revere trees they preach us the ancient laws of life. In one of his stories there is an aunt who watered her plants every morning. Even in rain she did not miss her routine because she thought that plants expected her at that time.

Bonds' stories have always been about delving deep into human psyche and revealing its various nuances in relation to nature and environment. He has examined his characters through and through analyzing their spiritual and intellectual sides. Their proximity to nature has lent their personalities a sober colouring and a harmonious combination of experience and innocence. Like Bond himself his characters too strongly hold the cardinal values of life dear. All his orphans, pets, physically challenged kids and even the neglected old men are portrayed with profound sincerity. Their simplicity is in consonance with his own simple life never ever detaching themselves from the reassuring responsive nature.

The writer hero of his novella Delhi is not far experiences the great translucent power of the mountain evincing strong sensibility and a meditative mind. He is simply awed by nature's connection with the divine process pouring tranquility and spiritual bliss into his heart. In the concluding sentence of his story *Mother Hill* the narrator says:

'When you have received love from people and the freedom that only mountains can give, then you have come very near the borders of Heaven' ^[14].

Bond gradually drifted away from the repulsive sociopolitical views of the materialistic world that drain man of his essential moral sensitivity. He never depended upon learned references and linguistically rich embellished and ornate. Far from the sickening view of sociopolitical humbug his literary journey trails a modest path in search of cherry trees, leopards, teashops or railway platforms. Because of Bonds' faithful adherence to the truth of nature he magnified small incidents and dwelt on trivia and most unlikely humble material. Because of his solemn proclivity for simplicity the mundane and humdrum objects are transformed into conveying our deeply felt attitudes. Nature governs every character of his. Their inner life and analysis of their motives and hidden impulses reveals nature's clear influence. Even his language resonates a uniquely Indian tenor tone and texture. His reliance on translation, quotation and Indian proverbs have created new metaphors and images. Even the vocabulary is distinctly evocative of his gentle world of coexistence. As an incidental unassuming ecocritic his stories are nothing but a celebration of nature in its fullest form. The soft and alliterative tone of his prose harmonizes with the mood of his stories.

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