



AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF RUSKIN BOND'S SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT:

The degradation of the environment is the key concern of the contemporary world. Our Mother Earth provides us with food, shelter and most of our requirements. Despite her kindness to us, we humans are being cruel to our earth with our selfish activities. Ecocriticism emerged as a literary theory towards the end of the 20th century. It is a study of the relationship between nature and literature. Various ecological movements have been taking place to fight environmental issues. Literature is also shifting its focus on ecological matters. Ruskin Bond is one of the most prominent novelists and short story writers of recent times. He resides in Mussoorie, at the foothills of the Himalayas. The region is blessed with an abundance of scenic beauty, flora and fauna. He is primarily considered as a nature writer. Being a nature lover, Bond is able to bring out the essence of the environment in his writings. He is concerned about the degradation of the environment at the cost of urbanization and development. His concern is reflected in his short stories. The present paper aims to study Ruskin Bond's environmental concern in his short stories in the light of ecocriticism. It would shed ample light on how Bond portrays the relationship between man and nature in his works.

Key words: - *Ecocriticism, Environment, Nature, Ruskin Bond, Deforestation, Urbanization.*

INTRODUCTION:

Ruskin Bond is an eminent contemporary Indian author of British descent. He is a novelist, poet, short story writer and essayist of great repute. Born in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh, in 1934, Bond grew up in Jamnagar, Dehradun, New Delhi and Shimla. His first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, written when he was seventeen, received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. Since then, he has written over five hundred short stories, a number of novels, essays, and children's books. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993, the Padma shri in 1999, and the Padma Bhushan in 2014.

Ruskin Bond's short stories reflect his concern for the degradation of the environment. Hills, mountains, birds, animals, streams and rivers are very close to Bond's heart, and he relates to them with intensity. His creative works are the celebration of the environment in which he lives. He prefers to live close to nature and moans for the lovely places which fell victims to greedy builders and development. His stories express

his concern for the environment and highlight our duty and responsibility towards it. The aim of this paper is to study Ruskin Bond's environmental concern in his short stories, in the light of ecocriticism.

What is Ecocriticism?

Environmental degradation is a matter of serious concern these days. It is the byproduct of human activities for a long time. It cannot be denied that the literary scholarship did not pay any heed to this grave problem for a long time. Ecocriticism, as a new critical discipline, emerged in 1990. It studies the relationship between the environment and literature. William Rueckert coined the term 'Ecocriticism' in 1978, in his critical essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. In this essay, Rueckert defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world". (1996, p. 107). Ecocriticism, then, aims to find a common ground for the co-

existence of human and non-human beings, because the environmental issues have become an essential part of human existence.

In 1996, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm co-edited an anthology entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. In the introduction of this book, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism. She writes, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”. (1996, p. xviii).

The eco-critics try to study a literary text from the point of view of the environmentalist. They evaluate and judge a literary text on the basis of the environmental consciousness, love and sense of responsibility expressed in the text. They seek a text where the non-human has the voice and message to convey, and aims at alleviating environmental degradation. Lawrence Buell, in his book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau Nature writing and Formation of American Culture* states that in an environmentally oriented work, the human history is inherent in nonhuman natural history, the text’s particular focus is on the human’s accountability to the environment (7-8).

Ruskin Bond in his short stories celebrates nature and also wants to warn his readers about the threats to the environment caused by industrialisation and urbanisation. 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”.

Ecocriticism in Ruskin Bond’s Short Stories:

Ruskin Bond is an ardent admirer of nature and an ultimate environmentalist who is concerned about the degradation of the environment. He is better known as the Wordsworth of Indian English writing. His stories inspire love, respect and concern for the environment, in the hearts of the readers. The threats of deforestation and environmental pollution and decay of lands and

fields have been the subjects of his stories. To him, a greedy man is more dangerous than tigers and leopards. *Dust on the Mountain* is one of the most popular collections of short stories by Ruskin Bond. The four out of five short stories discussed in this article are taken from this collection. These four stories are ‘Dust on the Mountain’, ‘My Father’s Trees in Dehra’, ‘Death of the Trees’, and ‘The Leopard’. The fifth short story ‘The Cherry Tree’ is taken from *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories by Bond.

In his short story ‘Dust on the Mountain’, Bond depicts the horrible picture of the exploitation of nature. The story is woven around a twelve-year-old boy, Bisnu who lives with his younger sister and mother in a very small village of Tehri Garhwal. The village is in the lap of nature, surrounded by oak, deodar, pine and apricot trees. The lack of monsoon forces him to leave his village and to look for work in Mussoorie, a big city. He works for a time in a cinema hall, where he meets two other friends Chitru and Bali. They all become friends and work together.

Bisnu then goes on to work as a cleaner boy for Pritam Singh, the truck driver, who carries limestone from the quarry to the depot. They work for the mine site where deforestation and blasting of mountains are common for lime powder. Bisnu is stunned by the gradual destruction of the trees. He feels sad for the trees that have been knocked down. This deforestation has turned down the life sustaining nature into dust and contamination. Due to the blasting of the top of the mountain, every object in nature is violently dislocated and killed. Bisnu thinks of the trees and wonders if it would also become a desert like the range with quarry. Towards the end of the story, we find that a worldly person like Pritam Singh perceives the life - saving power of trees, after when his truck met with an accident and was saved by an oak tree. This incident makes Bisnu

and Pritam Singh to rethink. Bisnu wants to return home and start harvesting. He says, “I will work on my land. It’s better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it”. (502)

Ruskin Bond’s another very sensitive and eco-concerned short story, ‘My Father’s Trees in Dehra’ presents the author’s visit to Dehra after many years. Bond’s father Aubrey Alexander Bond was a great lover of nature. He planted trees in his own garden as well as in the woods around Dehra. His father had said, “If people keep cutting trees, instead of planting them, there’ll soon be no forests left at all, and the world will be just one vast desert”. (300)

After many years of his father’s tragic demise, Bond revisits the land of his childhood. He sees koels and parrots live there and a number of other shrubs, grasses and plants have grown up under the trees he and his father had planted. Bond feels that the trees know him, they whisper and beckon him near to them. Bond says, “They have multiplied. They are moving in this small forgotten corner of the world, my father’s dreams are coming true, and the trees are moving again”.(301)

Bond here wants to convey a message that the tree plantation is necessary and it is the moral duty of man to impart it to their children.

In ‘Death of the Trees’ Bond presents a dreadful picture of deforestation in the name of development. Bond here expresses his grief on the catastrophic act of the PWD (Public Works Department). He feels sad on the felling of the trees like oak, deodar, maple, pine etc. He mourns the flight of beautiful forest birds like magpies, barbet, minivet and others, as their shelters are destroyed. Bond exposes here how the greed of man affects the animal world.

‘The Leopard’ is a tale of a night watchman and a leopard. Bond here wants to make us realize that every animal wants to live in harmony. Even the violent carnivorous animals like leopards do not harm man on their own. Yet man kills them for earning money by selling

their skins at a very high price. Bond here adds that the leopard does not harm the protagonist because he is not a greedy person. The sight of the killed leopard, hunted down by the poachers, makes the author feel very sad. Bond keeps a friendly relationship with all the animals, birds, trees and the other natural elements. Bond expresses his concern for the leopard which is nearing extinction in India.

In ‘The Cherry Tree’ Bond depicts a young boy Rakesh’s friendship with a cherry tree. Rakesh is a six-year-old boy who lives with his grandfather on the outskirts of Mussoorie. Rakesh plants a seed of the Cherry fruit in his garden with the help of his grandfather. The germination of the Cherry seed into a baby plant and the growth of the plant into a tree spread love and understanding between Rakesh and the Cherry tree. Rakesh guards the cherry tree through all the seasons. Even when there was rain, Rakesh would sometimes water the tree, because he wanted it to know that he was there. Watering the plants, even though it rains, emphasizes the importance of personal communication with nature. Bond in this story, speaks of his own reflection through Rakesh. Bond here tries to convey a message to safeguard the ecosystem.

CONCLUSION:

The study of Ruskin Bond’s short stories, in the light of ecocriticism, clearly shows that Bond’s short stories have sincere concerns about environment and ecology. Ruskin Bond in his short stories merges his life’s experiences with the environmental concerns. Known for celebrating the towering presence of nature in his works, Bond laments on the continuing degradation of the environment and writes of a sadder and colder environmental reality. His short stories highlight the sense of duty and responsibility towards nature.

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