

An Ecocritical Understanding in the Selected Stories of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract

Ecocriticism tends to investigate the relationship between literature and the environment. All living organisms, like plants, animals, and humans, are directly or indirectly dependent on nature for their growth and survival. Over the years, numerous works have addressed environmental sustainability. However, with the rise of ecocriticism, there has been a paradigm shift in the way readers and scholars interpret texts. Ecocriticism is the area of literary criticism that explores ecological issues in literary and cultural studies. In this regard, the works of contemporary author Ruskin Bond are especially noteworthy; he is a sincere lover of the natural world. Nature is a major theme in the majority of his works. The present paper will examine Ruskin Bond's two stories, "Death of the Trees" and "The Leopard" from an ecocritical perspective.

Keywords: Ecocritical study, destruction, ecosystem, environmental sustainability, ecology.

If the ecosystem is destroyed, the entire ecology will be destroyed as well. The destruction of the environment by humans is a persistent worldwide problem. Factors such as the sharp increase in the world's population, pollution, natural disasters, and global warming have had direct or indirect effects on our natural environment. Migration of people, whether from rural to urban areas or between countries and regions, significantly impacts the environment. The opportunity to enhance quality of life is what attracts citizens to urbanization. However, this migration from homes to cities in search of better job opportunities severely impacts the natural environment. Thus, these growing environmental issues led to the discovery of an interdisciplinary approach known as "ecocriticism," which gave rise to a plethora of fictional and non-fictional writings centered on how humans interact with nature.

The collaborative field of ecocriticism integrates cultural and ecological studies. The interaction between humans and the

environment, a contemporary social issue, likely includes ecological and cultural studies. The idea highlights how crucial humans are to ecological challenges, as well as the involvement of plants and animals. The major objective of the idea is to provoke critical thought about the relationship between humans and nature. Ecocriticism aims to read important literary works from an ecocritical perspective and closely examine how the environment is portrayed.

The human race as a whole is directly or indirectly dependent on nature, which is superior. The ongoing growth of urban settlements and the migration of people from rural to urban areas have significantly affected the natural environment. From the food and water, we eat and drink to the air we breathe, which we take for granted, nature provides us with a wealth of services. Nature not only provides but also heals, lowering stress and improving physical health. However, it is important to note that nature was once considered a victim, but it is no longer seen

that way; it is now regarded as a true hero. The impact it has on mankind is a kind of threat to us. Natural disasters like tsunamis, droughts, cyclones, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and wildfires are proof that they affect not only society but also whole communities. These environmental concerns became global, and thus, from the late 19th century, writers began to examine sustainability and ecological justice:

According to Buell, Thornber, and Heise, the first wave writings of the 1990s, which were ‘rooted in deep ecology’, displayed the tendency of equating environment with nature with a focus on literary representations of the natural world in all genres of literature, including the non-fiction with a focus on biological, psychological/spiritual bonds between the two entities the human and the non-human. The commonalities were explored in the spirit of ecocentric/biocentric ethics and environmental justice for the purpose of conservation of the natural world. (Jha, 2015, viii)

Nature and literature have always shared a close link, as revealed in the works of authors throughout the centuries across almost all cultures around the globe. The relationship between environment and literature is reflected in numerous ways, beginning from Anglo-Saxon times to the contemporary era. Some have analysed its scenic beauty, whereas others have praised it as a lover. In light of these observations, a comprehensive definition of ecocriticism emerged in the late 1970s, initially in the United States and subsequently expanded globally. William Rueckert came up with it in his essay, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in

Ecocriticism” in the book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, who has provided a very clear explanation of ecocriticism in his book, where he states that, “...ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, xviii). An ecocritic’s major concern is “to re-read major literary works from an ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world” (Barry, 2010, 254). The common view in such traditions, as effectively pointed out by M.H. Abrams, “envisions the natural world as a living, sacred thing, in which each individual feels intimately bonded to a particular physical ‘place,’ and where human beings live in interdependence and reciprocity with other living things” (2015, 101).

Ruskin Bond, a well-known novelist and story writer, was born in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh. Most of Ruskin Bond’s stories and novels depict his intense love for natural landscapes, particularly the Himalayan region. People living in the hilly regions of Dehradun and Mussorie often inspire his writings. Mother Nature has always been a central theme in Ruskin Bond’s writings, long before the eco-critical movement emerged. He has been writing since the early 1950s, when he was just seventeen years old. He is still writing in his nineties and amazes his readers by publishing new books almost every year. He focused on the Himalayas’ constrained features in his writings. He is the kind of person who could write a thousand lines on

nature without any problem. Bond has asserted this in his narrative, *The Lamp is Lit*:

Of flowers, lovers, melons, and moonbeams, I can write reams. But ask me to write the life story of a great leader or media tycoon or matchbox-maker, and I'm stumped and stymied. Those little drops of blood threaten to appear. I cannot breathe life into these subjects, noble though they might be. Their true personalities, the essence of their natures, somehow eludes me. (Bond, 1998c, 196)

He is a renowned author whose writing style is unmistakably in such a way that he attempts to inspire his readers to recognise the environment and traditions via his artistry. In a discussion with Amita Aggarwal, Bond speaks, "problems of deforestation, pollution, and environmental decay of wildlife have been the subject matter of most of my stories and essays" (Das, 2017, 109). It is also important to note that he did not invent the idea of ecocriticism; its roots extend back to ancient literary traditions across cultures. Bond stands as a significant practitioner who, for readers today, rekindles a human emotional connection to nature through his simple Himalayan narratives. This paper focuses on the two stories of Ruskin Bond and elucidates the writer's concern for environmental problems that are caused by human beings in the name of urbanisation.

"Death of the Trees" is an environmental concern narrative. In this story, Ruskin Bond demonstrates the terrible consequences of deforestation carried out by the PWD for development. The narrative portrays this event as highly emotional and violent, contrasting it with the routine practice

of woodcutting. Deforestation has a negative impact that extends beyond just killing trees and destroying bird habitat. In the very beginning of the story, Bond demonstrates how a hill's beauty and tranquillity are damaged by the construction of new roads, which threaten to bring an invasion of people and traffic. He also claims that, along with trees, his peace of mind is also lost due to deforestation, "the peace and quiet of the Maplewood hillside disappeared forever one winter" (Bond, 1991b, 93).

One of the story's most potent ecocritical elements is the intimate relationship between the tree and the narrator. Bond treats trees as living individuals rather than treating them as inanimate objects. In this narrative, we see Bond compare the growth of the walnut tree to Prem's young son, Rakesh. This shows how intimate his relationship was with Mother Nature. He further says that, just like a child, the tree needs care and protection, and when it has grown up, it provides us with comfort and shade. In the same way, as grown-ups, children provide shelter and food to their parents when they turn old. It is possible that Bond sees both growing without any obstacles in the lap of nature; it is the reason he made this comparison, "watching it grow just as I had watched Prem's little son, Rakesh, grow up.... Looking forward to its new leaf-buds, the broad, green leaves of summers, turning to spears of gold in September when the walnuts were ripe and ready to fall. I knew this tree better than the others. It was just below the windows, where a buttress for the road is going up" (Bond, 1991b, 93).

Bond's emotional connection to nature is further demonstrated when he compares a tree's life to his brother's, saying that for him, a tree's life is just as important as a human's, and that both his brother and the tree are victims of the road, with the exception that the tree was killed by a PWD while his brother was killed by a truck: "now cut down in its prime like my young brother on the road to Delhi last month: both victims of the roads. The tree killed by the PWD; my brother by a truck" (Bond, 1991b, 93).

It is evident that PWD has no grievances about the destruction caused by them, although Bond laments over the loss of trees, including, "maples, deodars and pines—most of them unnecessarily, as they grew some fifty to sixty yards from the roadside (Bond, 1991b, 94). He also laments over the loss of birds' shelters, which were destroyed in the name of development, ultimately leaving these birds defenceless and homeless. Bond states:

No longer will it be possible for me to open the window and watch the scarlet minivets flitting through the dark green foliage of the oaks; the long-tailed magpies gliding through the trees; the barbet calling insistently from his perch on top of the deodar. Forest birds, all of them, they will now be in search of some other stretch of surviving forest. The only visitors will be the crows, who have learnt to live with, and off, humans, and seem to multiply along with roads, houses and people, And even when all the people have gone, the crows will still be around. (Bond, 1991b, 94)

This tale eloquently describes the psychological toll of losing a beloved tree, which represents both individual transformation and broader natural causes. A

deeper loss of memory and mental peace is symbolised by this loss, which goes beyond simple physical loss. It also narrates how such devastation, caused by the rapid march of people from rural to urban areas, leads to ecological destruction and emotional loss. No doubt rapid urbanisation brings about the progress of mankind, but at the same time, these progressive changes are done at the expense of a sustainable environment. The story "Death of the Trees" not only addresses deforestation and environmental degradation but also laments personal loss, "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 langurs haven't shown their faces for over a fortnight" (Bond, 1991b, 94).

Bond has often voiced his concern about the rapid extinction of animal species due to deforestation in most of his stories. Urbanisation causes animals to lose their natural habitats and places of shelter. Humans hunt and disturb animals for their own benefit. It appears that animals will eventually lose their ability to live on the planet. Bond concludes that animals must have the same right to exist as people do. Bond's open judgement is that "wild animals are not an object of exhibition or entertainment. They deserve an equal right of graceful and unperturbed life as human beings do" (Aggarwal, 2005, 59).

This story, "The Leopard," highlights the relationship between animals and humans and the devastating effects of deforestation and hunting on animals, particularly leopards.

The Leopard opens with a realistic depiction of a ravine so deep that only a few people ventured there, providing animals with a safe habitat. These words demonstrate how animals and birds view human presence as a threat to them, “few people ever passed that way... As a result, the ravine had become a little haven of wildlife, one of the few natural sanctuaries left near Mussoorie, a hill station in northern India” (Bond, 1988a, 171).

Bond has a lifelong fascination with the natural world, and in this tale, he painstakingly captured the atmosphere of a location filled with lovely oaks, maples, Himalayan rhododendrons, wild roses, birds, langurs, leopards, etc. According to Bond, nature provides him strength, inspiration, and renewal. He views nature as his partner and finds relief in its lap, “I had lived in cities too long, and had returned to the hills to renew myself, both physically and mentally” (Bond, 1988a, 171). Bond expresses his concern about the gradual extinction of the leopard in the following lines:

The leopard, like other members of the cat family, is nearing extinction in India, and I was surprised to find one so close to Mussoorie. Probably the deforestation that had been taking place in the surrounding hills had driven the deer into this green valley; and the leopard, naturally, had followed. (Bond, 1988a, 172)

Bond appears to believe that animals have a sixth sense that enables them to recognise danger and forewarn humans against it. Essentially, Bond is attempting to prove that, regardless of what humans do to animals, animals remain loyal to them. This loyalty is evident when the langurs warn Bond from threats, “as I crossed the stream and

began climbing the hill, the grunting and chattering increased, as though the langurs were trying to warn me of some hidden danger. A shower of pebbles came rattling down the steep hillside, and I looked up to see a sinewy, orange-gold leopard poised on a rock about 20 feet above me” (Bond, 1988a, 172).

Through this story, Ruskin Bond also exposes humanistic supremacy through a group of hunters who are on a lively hunt for a leopard. They are believers of anthropocentrism, which considers man a central entity and other living creatures as existing only to serve them, looking to hunt him. The beautiful leopard with whom Bond has developed a natural bond, a bond which confers to the man with the natural world, “he (the leopard) was crouching there in the dark, watching me (Bond), recognizing me, knowing me as the man who walked alone in the forest without a weapon... acknowledged my visit in the friendliest way” (Bond, 1988a, 176), was killed by the hunters, “they had a long bamboo pole across their shoulders; and slung from the pole, feet up, head down, was the lifeless body of the leopard, shot in the neck and in the head ...they shouted, in great good humour. ‘Isn’t he a fine specimen?’” (Bond, 1988a, 176). They cannot even think of hurting or using animals for their profit. They do not hesitate to kill a leopard to obtain a favourable price for its skin. The concepts of humanity, compassion, trust, and love mean nothing to them. Due to this vicious, self-centred behaviour, a lovely planet has been destroyed. Bond conveys his agonizing grief here:

It was very silent, almost as though the birds and animals knew that their trust had been

violated. I remembered the lines of a poem by D.H. Lawrence; and, as I climbed the steep and lonely path to my home, the words beat out their rhythm in my mind: 'There was room in the world for a mountain lion and me.' (Bond, 1988a, 176).

Bond rejects the concept of anthropocentrism, because of this viewpoint, animals are now frequently exploited and mistreated for things like food, clothing, labour, and entertainment. Hunting harms the target species and disrupts the area's peace. Moreover, due to this intended human activity, animals have lost their trust in humans, as many animals have been driven into the valleys so that they could hide themselves from the evil eye of man, "there were fewer birds to be seen, and even the langurs had moved on. The red fox did not show itself; and the pine martens, who had become quite bold, now dashed into hiding, at my approach. The smell of one human is like the smell of any other" (Bond, 1988a, 174).

Ruskin Bond is undoubtedly a strong advocate for environmental causes. His writings often depict his intimate connection between humans and the environment. Although he is famous for writing stories, one should not ignore that his narratives generally reflect concern for ecology and the philosophy behind it. He is among the nature writers who repeatedly highlight environmental degradation through his writings. The protection of nature's flora and fauna is a significant issue in Bond's stories, and he urges his audience to do the same because, "the growing exploitation of the environment has had a menacing impact not only on the non-human world but also on the human" (Jha,

2015, vii). Ruskin Bond may not fit the stereotypical mould of an environmentalist, but his contributions to mainstream literature and his concern for the environment have a significant impact on readers' minds. With particular reference to the Himalayan region he adores, he has employed his storytelling powers to promote an understanding of the environment and the necessity for its protection. In this way, he has helped raise awareness of the environment among his readers and the general public.

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