

Ruskin Bond's Stories: A tool to elevate Eco-Consciousness

¹**Ms. Vijayalakshmi Bhat**

Research Scholar

Bhartiya Skill Development University, Jaipur

Mail id: vijayalakshmi.bhat@ruj-bsdu.in

²**Dr. Sangeetha Noval**

Associate Prof.

Bhartiya Skill Development University, Jaipur.

Mail id: sangeetha_noval@yahoo.com / sangeetha.noval@ruj-bsdu.in

ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism defines the study or understanding between literature and the environment. When literature is analyzed through the purpose of throwing light on the ecology, it brings an awareness about the destruction that is happening to our planet, and this awareness creates a moral and spiritual awakening, thus compelling the reader to question the choices that he makes.

Ruskin Bond is a writer who displays great sensitivity to the environment we live in. We see the characters in his stories going through a transformation in their thoughts, attitudes and actions, brought about by observing the destruction of the environment.

This paper attempts to explore four short stories of Ruskin Bond and his desire to create an awareness of the degradation of our planet. In the stories- 'The Cherry Tree', 'The Last Truck Ride', 'The Prospect of Flowers', and 'The Summer Season' he gives us an insight into how nature is vital for man's survival. When he damages the fragile environment, he paves the way for self-destruction. As long as his characters are able to preserve the balance in nature, they are able to function well on a physical, emotional and spiritual level. With the annihilation of the ecosystem, they find themselves disconnected with their inner selves and are overcome with a deep sense of discontent. The characters are filled with a sense of loss and wish to repair the damage to their surroundings in order to heal themselves. Ruskin Bond sensitizes the readers on the value of respecting nature as a way of respecting God.

Keywords:

Ecosystem, Environment, Degradation, Transformation, Emotional, Spiritual.

Ecocriticism refers to the observation and analysis of the co-relation between literature and the environment of this planet. The works of writers, poets and intellectuals is scrutinised keeping in mind the issues affecting our environment and the impact that it has on human beings. This interdisciplinary study gives us a broad spectrum of views which critics have also referred to as Green studies, Eco poetics and Environmental literary criticism. In addition to this, the study of the environment is also termed as environmentalism, ecology, bio politics and sustainable design. Cheryll Glotfelty was the

first to define Ecocriticism as *simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment* (owl.purdue.edu)

This line of criticism has maintained its distance from the moral or philosophical stand that is a part of other types of criticism. It is not confined to only the written word on the environment, but covers films, theatre and television. Literary theories take into consideration the social or cultural backdrop to be crucial factor, while ecocriticism highlights

the importance of nature in the progress of every aspect of humankind. Leading authors and their findings and research are read through the prospect of seeing their attitude and concern towards the environment.

The connection between literature and nature takes several directions and literary tropes, such as Ecofeminism, Pastoral and Wilderness. *Ecofeminism* takes into consideration the feminist approach towards ecology and searches for links between nature and the subjugation of women. Land is generally taken as an analogy for women and man considers himself to be the owner of the land and hence tends to dominate over it. Nature is disrupted when it is not treated with consideration and the same happens when women are crushed by the cruel male dominated society.

The dichotomy between rural and urban lifestyles has emerged as a strong trend in literature and it throws light on the advantages of a life lived close to nature. *Pastoral* ecocriticism gives the reader the ideal of a life that is respectful of nature. The harsh city life erodes the sensitive nature of human beings and this spiritual degradation makes human beings lead lives devoid of inner peace.

Wilderness ecocriticism is the trope where the planet is unaffected by pollution and human intervention, where he has not destroyed the delicate balance of the ecosystem by his greed for wealth. Literature has played a significant role in drawing attention to the problems that arise due to man's thoughtless disregard to the flora and fauna of our earth. An awareness has been ignited due to which officials and authorities have been forced to curb their activities which are harmful to the environment. People have realised that we need to preserve the planet in its pristine state to maintain the fragile ecosystem.

The Cherry Tree published in the volume, *The Night Train at Deoli*, is a story of a small boy Rakesh and his grandfather. Through the course

of the story we see the power of nature and its benevolence. One day Rakesh comes home with some cherries and offers one to his grandfather who advises him to plant it in the garden. As Rakesh promptly begins to dig up a flower bed, grandfather warns him to avoid that place as he had planted mustard in that plot. Throughout the cold winter the tiny seed lies buried in the cold ground and sprouts at the beginning of spring. Rakesh brings a bucket of water and is advised by his grandfather not to drown the little sapling. Grandfather has lived in the mountains for a long time and he knows about the changing seasons, the flora and fauna of that place. Through the character of the grandfather Ruskin Bond describes how 'ferns sprang from the trunks of the trees, strange looking lilies came up in the long grass, and even when it wasn't raining the trees dripped and mist came curling up the valley' (Bond, Ruskin. *The Cherry Tree* 133). As the cherry tree grows, it is at first partially eaten by a goat and then cut down by the woman cleaning the garden. They fully expect it to die but it survives and thrives and very soon there are flowers and fruits on it. The first visitor to the cherry tree is a praying mantis and Rakesh leaves it there, for it is a harmless little creature, but when a caterpillar sits on it and begins to eat the leaves he removes it as he sees its destructive quality. He is responsible for planting and nurturing the tree and so feels the responsibility of taking care of it. He puts it gently on the ground telling it to return when it changes into a butterfly. Small tips on caring for the environment are conveyed with great sensitivity so that the reader is able to imbibe them subconsciously into his nature. Birds and bees find nourishment in the fruits of the tree. Though the first fruits are sour, the birds enjoy them. The story ends with Rakesh and his grandfather resting in the shade of the cherry tree and marvelling at the miracle of nature. Rakesh is awed by how life is created and wonders if God feels the same sense of reverence at being the Supreme Creator.

Ruskin Bond, in this simple story shows the rapport that is built up between Rakesh and nature through observing the process of creation. When a young child feels the soothing influence of nature we are given to understand how he is evolving into a better human being, as a boy who is respectful of nature. This ecological awareness is necessary for preserving the balance of nature.

In *The Last Truck Ride* (No Man is an Island), Ruskin Bond depicts the alarming rate at which the environment is being destroyed by man's greed for monetary gains. Pritam Singh, a truck driver and his cleaner Nathu, had the job of driving to the limestone quarries in the mountains and bringing the loaded truck down. Nathu had come to the town in search of work as the potato crop had been a failure. In contrast to the village 'The hills were bare and dry. Much of the forest had long since disappeared. Just a few scraggy old oaks still grew on the steep hillside.... the hills were scarred by quarrying.' (Bond, Ruskin. *The Last Truck Ride* 17) One day as they were returning with an overloaded truck they meet with an accident and their truck would have fallen into the ravine if it were not for one 'scraggy old oak tree' that prevented this from happening. Nathu himself fell on some nettles which though prickly kept him safe from injury. After this horrific accident Nathu decides to go home to his village and tells Pritam Singh that "I'll work on the land. It's better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it" [23]. Pritam Singh realises that 'the truck would have ended up at the bottom of the hill and I wouldn't be heretalking to you. It was the tree that saved me' [23]

In his gentle way Ruskin Bond brings to the notice of the reader the harm that has been caused to the environment due to extensive quarrying of the mountain slopes. The limestone is blasted out of the hill by explosives. The sight of trees being destroyed always frightened Nathu and he wonders if the mountains would turn into a desert, without

grass, trees or water, and enveloped by dust. The limestone dust was all pervading, it hung in the air and covered the leaves and the bodies of all the people around that place. A single tree had the ability to prevent a big disaster from taking place and we can understand how trees are beneficial to the existence of humankind.

The Prospect of Flowers in the volume *No Man is an Island*, is steeped in describing the beauties of nature. The story begins with Ruskin Bond naming the various cottages situated in a small hill station, and the names are based on trees and nature. They were built by the British and are set amid oak, deodar and maple trees, and home to wild animals such as owls, goats and bandicoots. Bond has given us a picture of the beauty of the mountain region by describing the myriad aspects of the environment. In one such cottage, called Mulberry Lodge, there lived an elderly lady named Miss Mackenzie who was passionate about flowers and had a great variety of them in her garden. She was also very knowledgeable about insects and birds. She had not studied all this at a professional level but as she had lived there for a long time she had developed a love for her natural surroundings. One day she sees a young boy plucking flowers on the hillside and they soon strike up a friendship as they discover a shared love of nature, particularly flowers. She has a lovely garden of flowers and explains about them to the young boy. Anil, as the boy is called, reminded her of her brother, and Anil loved the flowers in her garden as well as the fresh bread that she baked. He could also sense the loneliness of the old lady. When he leaves for his holidays, Miss Mackenzie gifts him a rare, valuable book on flowers, perhaps having a premonition of her impending death. She passes away on a cold winter night and Ruskin Bond tells us that she had departed to the mountains where the most beautiful flowers grew. 'She had gone away to the mountain where the blue gentian and purple columbine grew' (86). Man and nature unite to the purest state.

‘The Summer Season’ (Time Stops at Shamli) is the touching story of Visni who had to come down from his village to the town to find work after the death of his father. The fourteen year old boy finds employment at the one and only cinema hall in the town. He works hard at his new job, trying hard to understand the ways of the world outside his village. He observes the ways of the town people, their talk and behaviour and is surprised how different they are from the simple village folk. They would get angry and ‘start shouting and pushing and climbing over one another’s heads.’ (94) Their behaviour was ‘rude and disagreeable’ (94). Once he accidentally spilt tea on a customer’s shoe and ‘received a vicious kick on the shin’ (94). The women seemed extremely strange to the innocent Visni. ‘The girls in his village had been healthy and good-looking’ but the city women ‘dressed in fine clothes, painted and perfumed.....chattered about inconsequential of vast importance’ (95). This life continues throughout the summer and then the cinema hall closes for the winter and Visni is without a job. By that time he had become quite disillusioned with the meaningless life of the city and decides to return to the vast natural surroundings of his village. Ruskin Bond describes his journey home against the backdrop of the snowy mountain region. He meets the sturdy, unassuming people of the land. ‘Visni felt at home with these strong simple men’ (97)

When Visni reaches his village he is greeted warmly by his family and he feels the great satisfaction of homecoming. ‘It was his house, and they were his fields; even the snow was his. When the snow melted he would clear these fields, and nourish them, and make them rich.’ (97) Ruskin Bond makes us aware of the dignity of working on the land, ‘even if it is more difficult’. (96). The life in the city dehumanizes people while the peaceful rural atmosphere nurtures the soul, increasing the level of awareness and consciousness. The futile pursuit of glamour is not sustainable and true bliss and

contentment can be found only in the lap of nature.

Ruskin Bond highlights the Pastoral and Wilderness aspects of nature where man lives in harmony with his surroundings. Nature is kind and when treated with love and care, it is generous in giving bountifully. Only when men and nature work in tune with each other can a balance be achieved. This benevolent aspect of nature occurs time and again in the stories of Ruskin Bond and when told in his characteristic simple style it makes a tremendous impact on the readers, young and old alike. His attempt to bridge the gap of understanding nature in all its glory is clearly seen in his short stories. He does not preach about the environment and the benefits of preserving it, but his stories are replete with the glories of nature and the reader is made conscious of these values.

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