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Raising Eco-consciousness: An Ecocritical Reading of Selected Short Stories of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract:

There is an impending ecological crisis which is inevitable as man is busy destroying his natural environment in an unrelenting pace. The ideology that man has the dominion over everything on this planet has enabled him to transcend the boundaries and now the time has come when we are taking more than required from the nature. Literature has remained sensitive to this issue since the awareness of this ecological crisis, and children literature could be instrumental in creating awareness and raising eco-consciousness in young minds. The short stories of Ruskin Bond are very popular among children and also appropriate medium through which Bond inculcates a sense of nature in young minds. This paper aims at reading Bond's select short stories; 'The Cherry Tree', 'Once Upon a Mountain Time' and 'Man and Leopard', under the lens of ecocriticism, which is the study of relationship between literature and environment.

Keywords: nature, eco-consciousness, ecocriticism, ecological crisis, intrinsic value.

Ecological imbalance and environmental degradation has become a subject of great concern in today's time and the need of the hour is that we should not only understand but also find a solution to this formidable global ecological crisis. H. J. McCloskey in his book *Ecological Ethics and Politics* (1983), posits "ecological crisis" is:

a crisis that threatens not simply the quality of life to be enjoyed by human beings but the very survival of the human race; that ecology reveals that *Homo sapiens* is, or is in danger of becoming, an endangered species; and more, that man is "ravaging" the earth in a reckless, irresponsible way, doing "irreversible damage" to it and thereby rendering it of less value in itself and for its members, including mankind. (Introduction p. 3)

Today, with burgeoning technology and advancement of science we are drifting apart from nature. There was a time, before mobile phones came in vogue, when children spent most of their playing hours in the lap of nature. Parks and gardens were the places for fun and recreation. But now a days the technological trend governs the age and indoor gaming culture has become popular among children and in most of the urban areas children hardly step out of their homes to play. Technology has paralysed their sense of nature; therefore, most of the children of urban families feel a disconnection with nature.

Children Literature is one of the most appropriate ways of inculcating a sense of environment in young minds. The very important aspect of children literature is that it not pleases the young minds but it could also be instrumental in imparting knowledge. In literature environmental crisis and ecological damage can be made understood to young children through various genres; one among them is short stories, a genre widely popular among children. Recently there are many thinkers and critics who have devoted their body of work chiefly to the 'attitude' and 'representation' of nature in literature. There is a new emerging branch of critical thinking in literary studies which primarily focuses on the study

of literature and Environment. This new and promising field is Ecocriticism; amalgamation of ecology and criticism. As Cheryll Glotfelty in introduction of the seminal anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader (1996)* explains ecocriticism as, “it is a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective . . . ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.” (xviii)

Currently, there are many writers who are representing nature in their works not merely as a picturesque backdrop but as an integral part of the story. Children literature is an apt choice to instil the importance of nature and its preservation. Children literature plays two important role .i.e. it pleases and also it educates. One of the most popular name that pop up in mind when we talk about children literature is Ruskin Bond, a prolific writer having to his credit an oeuvre consisting of over five hundred short stories, several novellas and poems. The name, most children are very familiar with. The looming ecological imbalance leaves us no choice but to acquire an eco consciousness. In this age the concern towards the impending ecological crisis is inevitable. This paper attempts to bring into light Ruskin’s select short stories to be re-read under the lens of ecocriticism.

Bond is one such writer who has imbibed a sense of nature. It is believed that a geographical condition of a writer also shape his writing. Probably bond’s connection with hills, landscapes, forests, streams, trees, birds etc is inseparable as he has spend a major portion of his life in Mussoorie. His works reflect his association with the place he lives in; there is strong sense of place in his stories. As a matter of fact he can unquestionably be classified as a nature writer. In his short story, ‘Once Upon a Mountain Time’, he clearly writes how much integral nature is to his personality. He says:

THE TREES STAND watch over my day-to-day life. They are the guardians of my conscience. I have no one else to answer to, so I live and work under the generous but highly principled supervision of the trees—especially the deodars, who stand on guard, unbending, on the slope above the cottage. The dark oak and maples are a little more tolerant, they have had to put up with a great deal, their branches continually lopped for fuel and fodder. ‘What would *they* think?’ I ask myself on many occasions. ‘What would they like me to do?’ and I do what I think they would approve of most! (215)

As an old saying goes “what you sow, so you reap” similarly what we inculcate in young children’s mind will help them become a better and responsible being tomorrow. Bond has exceptionally well dealt with the topics of his short stories which are times didactic too. Bond sees and acknowledges the ‘intrinsic value’ of non human others. Bond’s work could easily be categorized as ecocritical texts as they adhere to the criterion which Lawrence Buell has set up for determining whether a text is environment oriented or not. The criteria that he laid was to see if non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence, human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation and most important there must be some sense of environment as a process . Considering the gist of those principles Bond’s writings fulfil all the prerequisites of nature writing.

For Bond trees are not non human entities instead he feels a connection with them too, he further acknowledges his relationship with trees and Bond himself being a lover of nature writes in ‘Once Upon a Mountain Times’, “the trees and I know each other quite intimately, and we have much to say to each other from time to time”. (215) Consciousness raising is a very significant function of ecocriticism as it tries to foreground and “recuperate the hitherto neglected genre of nature writing”

The characters in short stories find nature and rest of non human others as their extended self, they love and nurture the nature instead of exploiting and destroying it. Bond has exceptionally well dealt with the topics of his short stories which are times didactic too. In 'Once Upon a Mountain Time', Bijju, a young rustic gharwali boy, has even named his beloved cow as Neelu. He would visit the writer's neighbourhood at times. Once the writer sees Bijju on a tree "he looked very right in the tree, as though he belonged there, a boy of the woods, a tree spirit peeping out from a house of glossy new leave" (OUMT 217)

Bijju seems very comfortable in the company of the tree. Bijju and his sister Binya have a very amiable relationship with the forest. These children could go to the forest without fearing as they are aware of the laws of nature and they adhere to it. They only take from it as much is needed and nothing more and:

these children are timid of humans, they are not afraid in the forest, and often wander far afield with Neelu the blue cow and others (And S, who is eighteen and educated at an English-medium private school, wouldn't go alone into the forest if you paid him!) But the trees know their own. They will cherish the wild spirits and frighten the daylight out of the tame." (OUMT 217).

The characters of this story are shown as nature loving people. They are benign children who do not see wilderness as a thing of darkness instead they are familiar with it, they belong to it and it belongs to them. There is a deep sense of belonging among the forest and those children. They share a bond that is beyond the understanding of city bred children and people as Harold Fromm in his essay 'From Transcendence To Obsolescence: A Route Map' talks about children in West and their disconnection with nature, he says:

To the average child of the United States in the present day Nature is indeed a great mystery, not insofar as it is incomprehensible but insofar as it is virtually nonexistent to his perceptions. Not only do most children obtain without delay the nurturing commodities for a satisfied bodily life, but they are rarely in a position to experience a connection between the commodity that fills their need and its natural source." (ER 33)

The intrinsic value of non human others is barely taken into consideration by humans. They believe that they have a dominion over everything in the world. This is anthropocentric approach which keeps man in the centre. Recent movements in critical literary thinking have proposed that there is a need for studying the interrelation between literature and environment. Similarly in his short story 'The Cherry Tree' Bond has tried to raise eco-consciousness and ecological awareness in young minds through a description of a boy's will to plant a tree. The story is about a young boy Rakesh who is six years old and lives with his grandfather on the outskirts of Mussoorie. The story delineates Rakesh's growth as a person and also his affiliation with the nature. One day while returning home from bazaar Rakesh bought cherries and started eating on the way back home. On reaching home he was left with the seed of the last one in his mouth and took it out in his palm and asked his grandfather.

'Are cherry seeds lucky? Asked Rakesh

'of course'.

'Then I'll keep it.'

'Nothing is lucky if you put it away. If you want luck you must put it to some use.'

'What can I do with a seed?'

‘Plant it.’(CT 82)

On grandfather’s advice he planted that last seed of cherry in a shady corner of the garden. After a year, oblivion of the seed, one morning he sees a twig in that corner of the garden and when he tried to pull that twig, to his surprise it was deep rooted and suddenly he realises that it was the cherry tree he planted a year back.

His grandfather suggests him to water it regularly. As the advices from elders are always precious, Rakesh did what his dada told and watered it regularly. “Even when there was rain, Rakesh would sometimes water the tree. He wanted it to know that he was there.” (CT 85) Bond has tried to impart a sense of responsibility towards environment through Rakesh. He took it not for a non human other but as an individual like himself. Being a boy himself he knew how much important it is to have a support and therefore he nurtures the cherry plant as his grandfather nurtures him. He put pebbles around the twig for privacy.

Time passed and Rakesh grew he was eight years old now and the cherry tree ‘was now up to his chest’. As an old saying goes “what you sow, so you reap” similarly what we inculcate in young children’s mind will help them become a better and responsible being tomorrow. Bond sees and acknowledges the ‘intrinsic value’ of non human others. For him trees are not non human entities instead he feels a connection with them too, he further acknowledges his relationship with trees and Bond himself being a lover of nature writes in ‘Once Upon a Mountain Times’, “the trees and I know each other quite intimately, and we have much to say to each other from time to time”. (OUMT 215)

The connection that Rakesh formed with the tree was unparalleled. He took it not as a mere tree but he considered it as a being like himself. He had learnt that the trees have intrinsic value. He knew exactly what the tree needs. One day when he saw a mantis “perched on a branch, peering at him with bulging eyes. Rakesh let it remain there. It was the cherry tree’s first visitor” (CT 85).

In the end of the story Rakesh asks his grandfather:

‘There are so many trees in the forest,’ said Rakesh. ‘What’s so special about this tree? Why do we like it so much?’

‘We planted it ourselves,’ said Grandfather. ‘That’s why it’s special.’

‘Just one small seed,’ said Rakesh, and he touched the smooth bark of the tree that had grown. He ran his hand along the trunk of the tree and put his finger to the tip of a leaf. ‘I wonder,’ he whispered, ‘is this what it feels to be God?’(CT 85)

This one act of kindness towards nature; planting a tree has made Rakesh understand the beauty of creation. Knowing that the tree that has grown fully because of one small act of planting a seed has made him feel what big difference he has made by contributing his bit towards environment. Thus, this is story is moralistic in approach; through this story Bond has conveyed an intense and empathetic message to the young readers.

In ‘Man and Leopard’, Bond has written about man and wild encounter. The story tries to depict the horror of hunting. The hunting of leopard solely for monetary profit is an unjustifiable act. This anthropocentric attitude towards nature has been addressed in the story. Anthropocentrism is a belief that places humanity in the centre and it has authority of over the earth. It is an approach that legitimizes man’s dominion over everything on this earth.

Similarly in this story the writer tries to reflect on the anthropocentric stance that enables the hunters to kill the leopard merely for monetary purpose.

In this story writer relates his experience of an encounter with a leopard and how he was hunted down by hunters. Being benevolent towards the forest and its non-human other inhabitants the writer did not feel scared of forest as he is aware of his growing proximity with the forest, he says “ As I had not come to take anything from the forest, the birds and animals grew accustomed to my presence; or possibly they recognized my footsteps” (ML 275)

Bond further makes a deliberate effort to inform the young readers about the extinction of leopard he says, “the leopard, like other member of cat family, is nearing extinction in India . . . 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.” (ML 275) in a way he has tried to insinuate that many species like the leopard are on the verge of extinction and this concern also comes within the ambit of ecological awareness paradigm.

The leopard followed the writer but it did not stir any amount of fear in him as deep down the writer knew that the animals of forest took him as a friend since he does no harm to them. The writer believed it was him that had made the leopard trust human race and thus got ensnared by the callous lot. The leopard trusted him and it was the benign writer who stood as an epitome of essential human goodness that the leopard started trusting humans. Perhaps, “I had made him confident—too confident, too careless, too trusting of the human in his midst.” (ML 279) The hunters informed the writer that “Leopard skins . . . were selling in Delhi at over a thousand rupees each”. (ML 277) Just for a handful of money the hunters killed the leopard not even thinking once that this animal also has a right to live.

The standpoint that Bond tries to portray in his short stories is the need of paradigm shift. It is a high time to understand the importance of raising eco-consciousness among people. As Glotfelty warns:

the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse . . . if we’re not part of the solution, we’re part of the problem” (Introduction xx-xxi)

We need to understand that the non-human others also have every right to be on this planet as us. There is an urgent need of realizing that we are inflicting severe damage on this planet. Bond has propounded the stance that nature is not to be taken unconscientiously, its degradation is dilapidation of humanity as there is interdependence and interconnectedness between both as Commoner says “everything is connected to everything else”. His short stories convey a moralistic message to young minds how integral nature is to us and how important it is for us to thrive.

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