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Ruskin Bond's *An Island of Trees*: A Gift of a Green Conscience

Jayasree. A

Asst. Professor(SS),

Dept. of English

Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science &
Higher Education for women, Deemed University
Coimbatore.

Abstract:

Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism* states that “The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. It is a construction mobilised to protect particular habitats and species and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city”(59). However, the absence of ethics and awareness in the way man deals with his environment, facilitates and feeds man’s growing sense of entitlement and ownership resulting in disturbing the rhythm of preservation and renewal that is the very essence of nature. The interactions between man and nature offers man the golden opportunity to reflect and evaluate his own state. As Aldo Leopold states in *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*, “there is value in any experience that reminds us of our dependency on the soil-plant-animal-man food chain”(178). Ruskin Bond’s ‘Island of Trees’, one of his iconic stories does exactly that. It passes on an invaluable gift, the gift of a green conscience while dwelling on the infallible nature portraits hinged on the author’s own meditations in the company of nature.

Keywords: Ruskin Bond, Ecocriticism, Environment Ethics, Green Conscience

Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* states that, “Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artefact called civilisation” (188). He also adds that, “The rich diversity of the world’s cultures reflects a corresponding diversity in the wilds that gave them birth” (188). The absence of ethics and awareness in the way man deals with his environment, facilitates and feeds man’s growing sense of entitlement and ownership resulting in disturbing the rhythm of preservation and renewal that is the very essence of nature. However, the growing awareness and the creation of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge bases linking environment studies with other branches of knowledge like Humanities has helped to facilitate intensive Green Studies that promote awareness and further conservation efforts.

A state of harmony between all forms of life is the key to maintaining the delicate balance of sustainability on the planet. It is essential to recognise that every form of life has a role to play in the ecological pyramid and their roles are not measured against their utilitarian value to man. Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism* states that “The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. It is a construction

mobilised to protect particular habitats and species and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city” (59). Eco critics lead us into a labyrinth of deliberations and reflections through the study of representation of nature in literature. Cheryll Glotfelty in her Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* published in 1996 defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. For literature to have a far reaching impact, it needs to align minds in sync with not only the world represented in the text but the world outside as well; the world that inspired the text. This is where the repertoire of Ruskin Bond, one of the most prolific writers of our times attracts the spotlight.

Bond’s depiction of nature is not just a sensory delight but shows an environmentalists’ concern for protection for nature. Breath taking slices of nature captured in all their captivating glory enriched with the writer’s powerful skill of observation renders his stories with an irresistible charm. He sketches all forms of nature that he finds around, mounting them onto a beautiful and breathtaking verbal canvas. In *Rain in the Mountains*, he talks about the marigold thus “ which flower is most redolent of India, of the heat and light and colour of India. Not for me the lotus or the water lily, but the single marigold, fresh, golden, dew drenched, kissed by the morning sun.” (124). He is the happiest in the company of nature. For him, nature is central to the story and character, and its effect on the people or people’s approach towards it forms the narrative. Thus they become a feast for the senses and lend warmth to the soul. Be it the rich pungent colour of crushed neem pods, the generous shade of the banyan tree, the stretching arms of the majestic deodar, the pretty visual feast of the wild dahlias, the tumbling of the clouds over the mountain or the call of the birds, Ruskin Bond’s presentation of naturescapes are infallible portraits hinged on the author’s own invaluable meditations in the company of nature. Bond loves being one with nature and being awake to its resplendence and desires the same from the readers as he expresses in his *Book of Nature*, “ When we walk close to nature, we come to a better understanding of life; for; it is from the natural world that we first emerged and to which we still belong.” (60).

‘Island of Trees’, one of Bond’s best short stories, pulls the reader into an ecocentric world where man and nature live in a symbiotic existence. The narrative is built around a conversation that a young girl, Koki has with her grandmother when she visits them for her vacation. Seated under grandmothers’ favourite jackfruit tree, she describes her father’s stint at the Indian Forest Service and his passion for trees. She also recalls how her father planted limes, mangoes, oranges, guavas, jacaranda, laburnum and the Persian lilac around his home after retirement. He hated chopping trees down that he renovated a temple around, “ an old peepul tree which had forced its way through the walls of an old, abandoned temple, knocking the bricks down with its vigorous growth” (54). With a penchant to grow trees, she added how Koki’s great grandfather would plant saplings in the scrubland and river bed during the monsoons. Her father would say, “We are not planting it for people to see... We are planting it for the earth - and for the birds and animals who live on it and need more food and shelter” (58).

Highlighting the importance of trees, Grandmother fondly passes on her father’s advice to her granddaughter. Trees are essential “ for keeping the desert away, for attracting

rain, for preventing the banks of rivers from being washed away. But everywhere people are cutting down trees without planting new ones. If this continues, then one day there will be no forests at all and the world will become one great desert!" (59) She recalls that two decades later, when grandmother visited her parents home, she discovered the island of trees in full bloom. It had transformed into a spectacular rapture of coral blossoms, a green paradise that in turn had invited a number of parrots, deers and pheasants amidst it. A host of smaller trees, wild grasses and plants had happily taken root under the protection of these gigantic trees planted by her decades back. She adds, "I ran my hands over their barks and it was like touching the hands of old friends" (62). The story is an invaluable lesson in narration from one generation to another opening doors to a whole new world wherein one respects nature and takes measures to plant, protect and conserve it. Bond paints the picture of the monsoon season in all its vernal exuberance. Plants and trees bursting into bloom in the most unlikely places - on the roof, window sill, the crevices between the rocks - it is a celebration of renewal and resurgence. For Bond, the Banyan tree is, "... a world in itself, populated with small animals and large insects" (58). At the height of monsoon, the tree would transform into an orchestra with the singing crickets and cicadas. It is a world that thrives in the care of people who understand the innate value of nature. It is a path, an approach that takes in a holistic view of nature along with an awareness of such an attitude's benefits on humanity.

The interdependency of plants, animals and human beings is held by a delicate balance, so much so that the slightest disturbance can cause far reaching impact on the planet and the human race. The chain that binds the human with other forms of life is emphasised effectively here. Patrick D Murphy in his *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries and Fields*, quotes Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, a social psychologist thus, "Whether we like it or not, our lives will leave a mark on the universe...Persons whose lives are autotelic help to reduce entropy in the consciousness of those who come in contact with them; those who devote all their psychic energy to competing for resources and to aggrandizing their own self add to the sum total of entropy"(3). Similarly, the interactions between man and nature offers man the golden opportunity to reflect and evaluate his own state. As Aldo Leopold states in *A Sand County Almanac:And Sketches Here and There*, "there is value in any experience that reminds us of our dependency on the soil-plant-animal-man food chain"(178). The interaction with nature invoke myriad emotions opening up, "a rich library of knowledge"(187).Writers are playing an active role in greening society, offering their personal response and criticism of the world's environmental deterioration and its various causes. In 'Island of Trees', it is not the individual that attracts moral consideration but the community as a whole, a community of which human beings are only a part, a community wherein all forms of life are equally important. The invaluable gift of a green conscience is passed from the grandmother to her granddaughter, that will help create and sustain all forms of life. As Bond beautifully summarizes in his Introduction to *The Book of Nature*, "Nature doesn't promise you anything-an afterlife, rewards for good behaviour, protection from enemies, wealth, happiness, progeny, all the things that humans desire and pray for. No, Nature does not promise these things. Nature is a reward in itself"(viii).

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