

## Opening a New Front for Environmental Awareness: Ecocritical Concerns voiced through the Stories of Ruskin Bond

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Ecocriticism as a branch of English literature was formally recognized only in the last decade of 20th century. It was with the publication of "The Ecocriticism Reader" by Cheryl Glotfelty that organized efforts were being made to formulate, discuss, and disseminate the ecocritical theory and its principals. Among other objectives, Ecocriticism explores the literary works to define and appreciate the ecological concerns addressed as the backdrop of human stories narrated as fiction. Such narrative tales composed as creative literature, often read like effective pamphlets for the cause of environmental awareness in the hands of sensitive writers like Ruskin Bond Environment takes the shape of a living character competing with the other human characters in the story for the readers' attention. Such character (Environment) often comes up as the winner as the readers are more captivated by the depiction of nature. Such stories leave the readers restless with the graphic description of the ecological disasters and other environmental problems.

This paper attempts to establish this view that creative literature is a new front on which the battle for environmental conservation is being fought in a subtle but effective way.

Environmental scientists, experts, researchers and the activists may not fully appreciate the role of ecocriticism in creating environmental awareness. Many may feel that literature does not offer any effective and practical solution to the environmental hazards. However we feel that, most of the environmental problems are born out of the unholy wedlock of material culture and mindless use of machines. So the problem lies with the mindset of the man. The modern world has been robbed of its treasure of spirituality. This problem needs to be tackled on the spiritual level. It is with this approach we are presenting our paper.

Literature is a medium of expression used by the creative writers. And 'Environment' is the physical and biotic habitat that surrounds us. Environmental awareness can be created on at least three levels- intellectual, emotional and spiritual. The formal 'save environment' campaigns are aimed at affecting people on the first two levels. Thus most of the environmentalists are trying to literate people about the scientific facts and the hazards of modern lifestyle. We feel that this approach is not going to help in the longer run. It may make people environmentally literate, but it may not inspire them to work consciously towards cleaner and safer environment. The ecologists and environmentalists' world over are concerned more about the ignorance and insensitivity of people towards the environment rather than the real ecological

hazards. So today we are more in need of spreading 'eco-literacy' among the consumer, who are more or less programmed to the 'use and abandon' attitude. This attitude can be challenged only; it is tackled on the moral and spiritual level. Since formal laws have done no better than to encourage the culprits to employ more subtle and discreet ways of violating environmental laws, it is time; we too use more subtle means to educate people about nature.

We believe that a good piece of creative writing, having environmental references, leaves deeper impact on the mind of the reader, than any intellectual pamphlet. After reading Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, as a young man student of literature, I longed to visit the 'blessed Wye valley'. When I finished reading God of Small things second time, I very much wanted to visit the backwater, full of mysterious greenery. Today when I read the stories of Ruskin Bond, I want to pack my bags for the hills of Gadwall. These are not only the aesthetic calls, but on the philosophical and ethical level, I found myself attached to the nature living in these pieces of literature. So, I always wonder, why not we can employ literature to sensitize the modern minds working only towards the physical betterment of man. Our literature is full or simple, beautiful and meaningful passages adoring nature in its true colors. Poems by Wordsworth and Whitman, novels by Hardy and Dickens can speak louder and clear than any formal 'save environment' campaign. In this paper we have made of a study of some of the stories of Ruskin Bond from eco-critical point of view. This study aims at pointing out the three important features of his stories: strong narrative, human values and aesthetic sense. We want to establish the fact that, any piece of creative (nature) writing, having these features proves to be more effective in creating environmental awareness especially on the moral and spiritual level. A good literary text has certain essential qualities to affect the people emotionally. It also has the quality to charge the readers spiritually and make them feel responsible morally. Some of the more important features of a creative text may include:

**Narrative:** A good literature has always carried with it, an inherent message for the humanity. It usually helps us make the right choices

**Aesthetic sense:** A creative writing offers us an understanding of our world through our senses. We derive pleasure when we read the beautiful ideas, rhythmic phrases and gripping metaphors.

### Why Ruskin Bond?

So far in this paper we have quoted the literary giants like Wordsworth, Whitman, Hardy and Dickens. But we choose to study Ruskin Bond for some important reasons. Bond is our contemporary Indian author. Secondly he is one, who has been literally living all his life in the lap of Nature. Lastly the masses and the critics alike hugely enjoy his literature.

#### Ruskin Bond-A Citizen of the good old World.

Bond seems to have preferred the company of Nature than that of the humans. After his father's death he could barely enjoy the company of any other human being. He has always been a lonely man living in his own world-which most of us don't even recognize. The ancient hills, benign Maples, Oaks, & Pines, lonely red fox, cicadas, magpies and koalas, the river and the rains- these are the inhabitants of his world. Most of us don't consider nature as a part of our world. The humans have never been so self-centered as to alienate themselves from the nature. Bond, through his stories, quietly but convincingly, makes us recognize the worth of nature. He does not preach us with the grave ecological concerns. He simply introduces us to the nature as part of his life-live and breathing. The nature is one permanent character that always finds a place in his writings. Most of Bond's stories are autobiographical in nature. So the reader is almost convinced of the reality of the world he portrays in his stories. The lyrical quality of his prose makes the reading a wonderful exercise, bound to make one happy and enlightened at the same time!

We have chosen three of his stories- 'My Father's Trees in Dehra', 'From Small Beginnings', and 'Death of the Trees' to study the eco-critical aspects from literary point of view. All the three stories are set in the hills of Gadwall. 'My Father's Trees in Dehra' is an emotional journey to Bond's childhood days, when his father was alive. He remembers how his father used to plant the trees on the barren land during rainy season. The child (Bond) was confused:

'But no one ever comes here, who is going to see them?'

His father simply said:

"Someday, someone may come this way.... 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"

There cannot be any better practical way to impart value-education to your children than this. A father who loves reading Bond cannot remain unaffected by this little incident in the story. It has a silent emotional appeal to all the fathers reading it. There is another small incident from the story, moves the reader deeply by means of almost poetic narration:

"He was happy when he was among trees, and this happiness communicated itself to me. I felt like drawing close to him. I remember sitting beside him on the veranda steps when I noticed the tendril of a creeping vine that was trailing near my feet. ... I found that the tendril was moving almost imperceptibly away

from me and towards my father. Twenty minutes later it had crossed the veranda steps and was touching his feet. This, in India, is the sweetest of salutations"

Bond's further remark on the incident takes us to some higher plane where, the mundane considerations of profit and loss are removed. He says: "There is probably a scientific explanation of the plant's behavior- but I like to think that its movements were motivated simply by an affection for my father. Sometimes when I sat alone beneath a tree, I felt lonely or lost. As my father rejoined me, the atmosphere lightened, the tree itself became more friendly." Bond further remembers how his father took him nearer to the nature through 'the age old carriage of myth.' He remembers his father telling him, how once trees could move, before somebody cast a spell on them. His father believed that: "... they are always trying to move-see how they reach out with their arms."

The story ends with a kind of realization of his relationship with the trees his father had planted. The trees seem to know him now. He could see that the myth, his father had told him, came into reality.

"They (trees) 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." Here trees have become a personal consolation for him for his lost father. Bond could see his father's soul, whispering and beckoning him from among the trees. "From Small Beginnings" is story of his loneliness. He was living alone in his cottage, after his longtime servant had left for the better-paid job. During those days he used to watch a little red fox along the hillside roaming alone. He writes: "My affinity was with the little red fox who roamed the hillside below the cottage". Apart from its emotional appeal, this story has a gripping narrative that does not allow the reader to wander away.

"When the trees saw me they made as if to turn in my direction. A puff of wind came across the valley from the distant snows. A long-tailed blue magpie took alarm and flew noisily out of an oak tree. The cicada was suddenly silent. But the trees remembered me. They bowed gently in the breeze and beckoned me nearer, welcoming me home." The passage is not merely descriptive of the natural surroundings, but it turns our senses inwards- it helps us broaden our understanding of the world. The sensuous quality of the words makes it almost possible for the readers to experience the beauty of the natural world:

"Three pines, a straggling oak, and a wild cherry. I went among them and acknowledged their welcome with a touch of my hand against their trunks- the cherry's smooth and polished; the pine's patterned and whorled; the oak's rough, gnarled, full of experience." To Bond, the oak, like a philosopher, is careless about his dress and appearance. "...the oak has secrets, a hidden wisdom. He has learnt the art of survival". The story makes us believe that Bond's life is so intricately mixed with the nature, that it cannot be understood, unless we understand nature. The Oaks, Pines and Cherries are no longer the familiar

tress with found associations or memories; they are complete individuals in their own right. The title of the story "From small Beginnings" reminds us of the small cherry seed sown by young Ruskin... which grew into a healthy tree, despite the adverse conditions. Bond writes;

"One day I had this cherry seed in my hand, and on an impulse I thrust it into the soft earth, ....a few months later I found a tiny cherry tree in the long grass. I did not expect it to survive...the following year it was two feet tall. And then some goats ate its leaves... and I was sure it would wither away. But it renewed itself, sprang up even faster... within three years it was a healthy tree."

Bond looked at the tree as he would have looked at any great source of joy, energy, and inspiration. One summer night, lying under the cherry tree he could feel the universal soul, so much talked about, by the poets and philosophers, while looking into the star filled sky: "And I felt the power of the sky and the earth, and the power of a small cherry seed". Here with the power of storytelling Bond has transformed the story of a cherry tree (of birth, growth and the survival) into his own life-story. He did not have to connect it... as he was the part of it.

No sensitive reader would remain untouched by the wonderful story of a cherry tree, which happens to be the story of his/her life!

"Death of the Trees" is a moving 'obituary', Bond wrote, when he saw the trees were being cut in the name of development. He talks about trees, as he would have talked about the humans. For him most of the felled trees have their distinct identities. He could remember the days he had passed with them. The changing seasons are nothing without the trees. He remembers the green-summer and gold-autumn... and dry-withered-winter! He talks about a felled Deodar:

"Some years back it was stunted from the lack of sunlight.... So I cut some of the overhanging branches and after that the deodar grew much faster. It was coming into its own this year; 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." The usual cool and lyrical Bond sounds harsh and tough. He said that the thousands of oaks have been 'slaughtered' unnecessarily. He seems to be the lonely warrior, fighting the losing battle. He says:

"The trouble is, hardly anyone (with the exception of the contractor who buys the felled trees) really believes that trees and shrubs are necessary. They get in the way so much." While reading this one can feel the undercurrent: who is really crossing the boundaries?

It is battle between two-world orders- the old world, when the Nature was recognized and respected, and the new world, where the Man is the master and Nature is the slave.

Bond portrays a horrible picture of his world without the trees. In his own inimitable style, Bond paints the world without the 'green-soul'. He replaces singing birds with the crows; the chirruping is replaced by sounds of motor horns. He says: "Other things to look forward to: trucks thundering past in the night... the grinding of gears, the music of motors horns. Will the whistling thrush be heard above them?" Bond wants to leave this noisy place for some quieter place, where the modern roads have not reached yet. But on the second thought he feels that- "To retreat is to be loser. But the trees are losers too; and when they fall, they do so with certain dignity.

"Despite the feeling of dejection, Bond recovers with a glimmer of light. He concludes: "Never mind. Men come and go; the mountains remain"

'Death of the Trees' is a story about the most common, almost every day happening in our life. Every day we see trees cut and felled, but we don't associate the incident with death of a person. Here Bond makes the sensitive reader share the grief and anguish at the merciless slaughter of the innocent trees. The reader feels that these trees are the members of Bond's extended family.

Before I conclude, I must say, that awareness of any kind cannot be created/spread by using a generalized tool. Formal campaigns may prove to be useful for the illiterates and non-readers. Intellectual pamphlets may spur the debate among the intellectual community. But here I am concerned about those who are neither illiterates nor intellectuals. I am concerned about the people who matter most- the ever-growing middle class. So I am not opposing any formal pro-environment campaign, but I wanted to have some better options for the large section of society, which seemed to have the responsibility of changing the world we live in.

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