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A Bionomical Approach to Indian English Literature with special reference to Ruskin Bond's Fiction.

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ABSTRACT

Nature and literature have always shared an intimate and amicable relationship as is evidenced in the works of poets and other writers down the ages across the globe. Today this close relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized in every sphere under the name of 'Bionomics' or 'Ecological Studies'. It is the study of environmental systems. "Environmental" usually means relating to the natural, versus human-made world; the "systems" means that ecology is, by its very nature, not interested in just the components of nature individually but especially in how the parts interact. But, as we can look around, that the whole globe is in the clutches of serious ecological crisis. Rapid environmental changes cause mass habitat extinctions known as Holocene extinction. One estimate is that <1% -3% of the species that have existed on Earth are extinct. History has proved that the changes in environment have been so acute that sometimes it has wiped the whole civilization from the face of the earth. Therefore, if we wish to pass on a safe and healthy world to posterity then protection of environment is the issue of immediate concern. Literature could not remain unaffected from this depletion and my paper is related not only to this burning issue of ecological crisis but also focuses on the eco-conscious efforts put in by various Indian English writers back in history till date and how the concern for nature changes in Indian literature from reverence to destruction. A detailed study of the writings of Ruskin Bond, a contemporary Indian English writer, brings forth his great concern and reverence towards Nature and therefore his works have been of primary concern in this paper.

KEY WORDS: bionomics, ecology, negligence, environmental concern, holocene extinction.

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INTRODUCTION

“Man is a child of his environment.”

- Shinichi Suzuki

The interdependence of Nature and society can be studied under the broad genre of ‘Bionomics’ or ‘Ecological Studies’. The subject matter of Ecology, is a rich and dynamic area focusing on attempting to understand how natural selection developed the structure and function of the organisms and ecosystems at any of the levels. In modern times, it has become the concern of every country to replenish the diminishing factors of ‘Ecology’ which is defined as the way in which plants, animals and people are related to each other and their environment¹, which threatens human beings the most. The most urgent issues like global warming, chronic resource shortage, rainforest destruction, and species extinction indicate the “end of nature”. Myriads of physical as well as mental problems are emerging due to the environmental degradation. The two components of nature, organisms and their environment are not only much complex and dynamic but also interdependent, mutually reactive and interrelated. Therefore, concern for ecology is one of the most discussed issues today. Literature well known for reflecting the contemporary issues could not have remained unaffected from this theme. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature.

However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of environmental concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to some new branches of literary theory, namely Ecocriticism, green cultural studies, Ecopoetics etc. The word ‘Ecocriticism’ first appeared in William Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978. It is said to be the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. It expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere and takes an earth centred approach to literary criticism. Here, I quote some lines from the **U N World Chapter on Nature:**

“Life depends on the uninterrupted functioning of natural systems which ensure the supply of energy and nutrients. Civilization is rooted in nature, which has shaped human culture and influenced all artistic and scientific achievements.”²

DISCUSSION

Most ecological work shares a common motivation, that is, the 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 system. This awareness brings in us a desire to contribute to environmental restoration, not only as a hobby but as a representative of literature. Although not many, there are a few novels in the history of Indian English literature which can be read through the lens of '**Bionomics**'.

When history is examined we find **Raja Rao** as one of the most prominent writers of Indian English novels. His wide ranging body of work, spanning a number of genres, is seen as a varied and significant contribution to Indian English literature, as well as World literature. His depiction of the South Indian village culture and environmental setting is a true depiction of relationship between man and nature. In his novel 'Kanthapura' he has shown how rivers and mountains play an important role in people's lives. They have names for them. In this novel they call the mountain as Goddess Kenchamma and they consider it responsible for both – their prosperity and their adversity. Raja Rao writes about Kenchamma in the novel,

“Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she.....never has she failed us in grief. If rains come not, you fall at her feet and say, 'Kenchamma you are not kind to us. Our field is full of younglings.’”³

Achakka quickly creates a faithful image of an Indian way of life, circumscribed by tradition and indebted to its deities, of whom Kenchamma, the great and bounteous goddess, is made the village protectress. She is invoked in every chapter, for the characters never forget that her power resides in her past action. It is she who humanizes the villagers, and their chants and prayers ring out from time to time. These first few pages of 'Kanthapura' reminds us of the age old practices of our ancestors when nature was revered in the true literal sense.

R. K. Narayan wrote in the same decade and has given life to a place, Malgudi, or it can be said that he has developed a place as a character which can be seen in almost all his prose fictions bearing the same features. In other words, he used landscape as an important theme. Malgudi, a small South Indian town provides the setting for almost all of Narayan's novels and short stories. It is an imaginary landscape inhabited by the unique characters of his stories. In Narayan's words himself:

"Malgudi was an earth-shaking discovery for me, because I had no mind for facts and things like that, which would be necessary in writing about Malgudi or any real place."⁴

In 'The Dark Room' the river and the ruined temple leave a benign influence on Savitri. The flowing Sarayu, the ruined temple and the stone slabs influence Raju in 'The Guide', and contribute to his sainthood. It is the spirit of Malgudi that helps him to face the ordeal of fast in the right earnest. It is the retreat across the river that almost transforms Jagan. Thus Malgudi is a character.

Nature has always proved to be stronger than man. It has often shown its power by controlling manpower through natural calamities like famine, drought, flood, earthquake etc. Man's life and nature are so interlinked that it is not possible for human beings to separate themselves from its influence. Therefore, they have no choice but to accept both nature's bounty and adversity. This can be said to be reciprocal as nature too is the recipient of man's action. Our irresponsible actions cause irreparable damage to nature.

The effect of one such natural calamity on the humanity can be seen in more contemporary writer **Bhabani Bhattacharya's** 'So Many Hungers'. In this novel we see the true picture of Bengal famine of 1943 in which at least 3,000,000 Indians died of starvation. The novel is compounded of the ingredients of sighs and tears, misery and squalor, hunger and poverty and heroic suffering and sacrifice. The Bengal famine of 1943 which crushed millions under its devastating truculence forms the major part of the novel's plot.

Again, there is a writer whose works show ecology not only as an important or dominant theme, but there is also a great concern for natural depletion taking place. He struggles to connect the humans to the concern for Nature and human welfare together; realizes and envisages the ultimate truth of life. Nature as a power is his starting and finishing point and he feels a profound wonder and awe for these. He churns up new stories everyday based on the philosophy pretty different from his contemporaries. His name conjures up misty hills, lush green valleys, gurgling brooks, long languid stroll through the forests, small-town vibes and of course, Dehradun or simply Dehra. We are talking of **Ruskin Bond**. The natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie almost invariably form the setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. In the rendering of his childhood trauma, he found solace and meaning to his life in the calm and peaceful landscape of the Himalayas. Nature in its

myriad shades and contours enriched his soul that finds brilliant expression in his writings. Ruskin Bond occupies an outstanding position among the contemporary Indian English writers.

He shows his worry for the unthoughtful actions of man towards nature. Through his writings, he has tried to convey an important message to everyone, that is, the importance of nature in our life.

“We grow at much the same pace, if we are not hurt or starved or cut down. In our youth we are resplendent creatures, and in our declining years, we stoop a little...we stretch our brittle limbs in the sun and then, with a sigh, we shed our last leaves.”⁵

In another writing of Mr. Bond, *The Kitemaker*, protagonist Mahmood Ali, speaks of the inseparable relationship between man and nature. The analogy of man and tree gives the total essence of Ruskin Bond's treatment of nature. The entire corpus of his work – both fiction and non-fiction is a magnificent document of his deep association with nature. His search for life throbbing in each big or small object never slackens. Bond develops logic. He feels that nature bares her bosom alike for all big and small, weak and strong. The difference lies in individual's sense of perception. One may approach nature to conquer her, the other may try to exploit her, but one who is filled with love for her, chooses to live with her in total harmony.

Bond characters are also drawn from that section of society who lives in close association with nature. To name a few among them, there is Binya who holding her blue umbrella, runs after her cow, Neelu. There is Dukhi weeding and pruning in the garden. Sita, who devises her sports around the old banyan tree in her lonely island, Somi's mother who nurtures her small garden of sweet peas and roses, are some of his favourite characters.

Bond in his approach to nature is quite different from that of other contemporary writers such as Anita Desai in *Fire on the Mountains* and Jhabvala in *Heat and Dust* who employ nature as a backdrop to worldly worries, their characters who come under the therapeutic effect of nature for a short while, feel elevated and energised but they cannot overcome their agonies, they are chiefly from modern slums which are not only the heaps of garbage but also dens of vices. Som Bhasker's quest for shares is irresistible. Jhabvala's unnamed heroine bears the foetus of her city lover; Anita Desai's Nanda Kaul fails to shake off her post despite her physical escape from the scorching plains to the soothing hills. All of them are facility ridden people unknown of the art of living. But Bond's people live very close to nature. Unlike his well-known contemporaries who are especially concerned with social political turmoil, he takes up the issue of ecology and environment through his stories in most conspicuous

manner. In response to question put by the author about the lack of social concerns in his fiction, Bond replied:

“Problem of deforestation and pollution of environment and decay of wild life have been the subjects of my stories and essays. In this way, I have touched social problems”.⁶

Without joining the band of known environmentalists like Sunder Lal Bahuguna and Baba Amte, Bond is constantly scribbling about the hazard of pollution of environment. The planned destruction of trees on mountain slopes in the name of progress and development is the theme in many of his stories. The story *Dust on the Mountains* narrates how money-mongers lure hill simpletons. The story unravels the sordid picture of ‘green’ massacre:

There were trees here once, but the contractors took the deodars for furniture. And the pines were trapped to death for resin, and the oaks were stripped off their leaves to feed cattle.⁷

The sight of ravaged hills is so pathetic that no bird comes to warble. Only the crow is seen because they have learnt to live with man. Thousand-year-old rocks are blown by dynamite. Their dust is stifling trees, grass, shrubs and flowers far and wide. Horns of the truck and dynamite explosions toll the knell of death and disaster in the hills.

Bond focuses upon the extinction of tigers and leopards also in many of his stories. He strongly opines that tiger and other animals are not as dangerous as man of the plain thinks of them. It is only when some bullet wounds them and they are unable to prey, they attack human beings. Thus the problem of man-eater owes its existence to the unkind poachers and hunters.

In another story *The Leopard* a village boy wanders alone in the forest without any protection. He develops a mute understanding with the beast. He likes the presence of the magnificent beast crouching at the bank of the river and in return beast too, seems to acknowledge his visit in a friendly way. Both are confident towards each other.

Kishen Singh in the story *The Tunnel* seems to assure the leopard by keeping this bond of trust. When asked about the safety in the jungle, Kishen Singh promptly replies,

“It is safer in the jungle than in the towns. No rascal out here. Only last week when I went into the town I had my pocket picked. Leopards do not pick pockets.”⁸

Forest, tiger and man are interdependent. They are the part of the great chain of survival. By calling the endangered beast the soul of India Bond has reinforced the principle of ecological balance. Each big and small creature in nature is indispensable to keep the earth beautiful and healthy. Bond has skillfully knit the message of ‘save tigers, save wildlife’ in the plots of his fiction. Beside wildlife, Bond

earnestly pleads to save the green layer of the earth. The relationship of man and tree is revealed through the ancient belief,

“A blessing rests on the house where the shadow of a tree falls.”⁹

Trees are the manifestation of god’s benediction. For youngsters they are their playmate and for elders the sharer of their joys and sorrows. They preserve the lost gems of childhood and youth. In *The Blue Umbrella* Bijju feels a sense of security and confidence while perching on the top of oak:

“The higher he is in the tree the more confident he becomes. It is only when he is down on the ground that he becomes shy and speechless.”¹⁰

Trees are the archetypes of friendship. This relationship is completely free from the stylistic ways of other worldly relationships. Bond conceives an analogy between children and trees that they like children grow rapidly and achieve stateliness if someone strokes them fondly. In his ‘An Island of Trees’ the grandmother reveals to her granddaughter, Koki, the deep bond that grows between humans and nonhumans if only there is love and compassion. ‘No Room for a Leopard’ is about deforestation and its accompanying aftermath. It presents the pathetic condition of the animals after deforestation. In ‘Copperfield in the Jungle’ he shows abhorrence towards hunting for pleasure which can never be justified. ‘The Tree Lover’, ‘The Cherry Tree’, ‘All Creatures Great and Small’ and many others are all about the chain which binds man and nature, as in the chain of ecosystem, showing interdependence. He has always emphasized on the friendly relationship between man and nature and has brought before us our need for each other. That is why we notice his pity for the unsympathetic and cruel actions of human beings towards nature. The story ‘The Sensualist’ serves to call us back to our natural living and to preserve the ecological balance. The mountains retain their magnitude and primitive force so long as they are not spoilt by the so-called “White Civilisation” with its polluting forces of greed and cunningness.

Thus, Bond’s attitude to nature or the Universe begins from simple sensory delights and culminates into humanism his fiction gently brings us back to nature in order to regain our primitive innocence and faith.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, we can see that Indian English fiction particularly Bond’s fiction is rich with ecological references and among the recent fictions it can be most aptly given a bionomical reading. Bond in his writings tries to show that if nature thinks of revenge for our cruelties towards her the whole

humanity which boasts so much of their brain will be washed away from the face of the earth. He presents the political sham that is involved in the name of protecting animals and their natural habitat at the cost of innocent lives.

From the beginning the writers have shown interest towards nature, culture and landscape. In the later phase it gathered speed and more and more works of different writers were published which could be read under this approach. This can also be because the scope of ecological studies widened because of the inclusion of the different perspective proposed by the writers around the world.

Hence, we need to prove sincere, selfless, honest and loyal towards it by inculcating in us a true sense of environmental ethics and ecology which have been literary speaking the main gist or focus of any ecological study. I believe, the writers across the world have more responsibilities regarding developing ecological and environmental awareness among the common masses regarding the environmental limits and the consequences of human actions damaging the planet's basic life support system. This awareness will inspire us to contribute more to the environmental restoration not only as a hobby but also as a representative of Literature.

To sum up, as a distinctive approach to the practice literary criticism, Bionomics or Ecological studies give increased attention to literary representatives of nature and are sensitive to interdependencies that ground the author, character or work in the natural system. This approach shifts critical focus from social relations toward natural relationships and views the individual as a member of ecosystem. It values highly the 'literary sense of place' not as setting but as an essential expression of bonding with or alienation from a specific natural context.

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