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Biodiversity and Ecological concern in Ruskin Bond's selected Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

Biodiversity is the degree of variation of life. This can refer to genetic, species or ecosystem variation within an area, biome, or planet. India is a country with variety of ecosystems. With time, they have been adversely affected due to avarice of mankind. 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. The two components of nature, organisms and their environment are not only complex and dynamic but also interdependent, mutually reactive and interrelated. Ecology relatively a new science, deals with the various principles which govern such relationships. History has proved that the changes in environment have been so acute that sometimes it has wiped the whole civilisation from the face of the earth. 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.

This paper focuses not only on biodiversity and burning issue of ecological imbalance but also focuses on eco-conscious efforts put in by Ruskin Bond in his short stories. Sitting at his desk in Ivy Cottage...precariously perched on a spur in the hills of Mussoorie, Bond looks out from his window and sees and hears things we are blind and deaf to.

KEY WORDS: Biodiversity, Nature, Environment, Ecology, planet, negligence, Himalayas & beauty, Ecological concern.

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INTRODUCTION

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 with a sigh, shed our last leaves¹.

Kitemaker, Mahmood Ali, in the story “The Kitemaker” speaks of the inseparable relationship between man and nature. Further he adds:

To begin with, I wasn’t environmentally conscious, in those days, I don’t think the very word existed, so it was just it had the touches the way I felt and thought, and now of course now there are so many people who are at least conscious of the environment, what’s going wrong with it and what should be right with it. So if I helped in a small way, that fine. So I didn’t really set out consciously to (promote environmentalism) though I would certainly emphasize the destruction of forests and diminution of wildlife².

Biodiversity impacts human health in a number of ways, both positively and negatively. It is 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 environment, which threatens human beings the most. At the dawn of the new millennium, the whole globe is facing serious ecological crisis. 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 crisis. If we wish to pass on a safe and healthy world to children then protection of environment will be the issue of immediate concern.

The term ‘Biological Diversity’ was used first by wildlife scientist and conservationist Raymond F. Dasmann in 1968, in his book *A Different Kind of Country*³ advocating conservation. The term was widely adopted only after more than a decade, when in the 1980s it came into common usage in science and environmental policy. Philosophically, it could be argued that biodiversity has intrinsic aesthetic and spiritual value to mankind. It plays a part in regulating the chemistry of our atmosphere and water supply. Biodiversity is directly involved in water purification, recycling nutrients and providing fertile soils. Experiments with controlled environments have shown that humans cannot easily build ecosystems to support human needs; for example insect pollination cannot be mimicked.

The United Nations designated 2011–2020 as the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity. The conservation ethic advocates management of natural resources for the purpose of sustaining biodiversity

in species, ecosystems, the evolutionary process, and human culture and society. We can't ignore the fact that the modern technology has enabled us to earn material prosperity quite unequalled in the history of mankind but, it is at the cost of many precious things especially environment which has compelled even writers to talk of it in their writings. In fact, a particular school of criticism popularly known as Ecocriticism was born on the literary map of the world. It is a literary criticism from an environmentalist view point. Here, texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects. Beliefs and ideologies are assessed for their environmental implications. Ecocriticism takes an earthcentred approach to literary criticism and traces the relations between writers, texts and the world (ecosphere).

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 achievements⁴.

A writer who follows such environment ethics and whose works show ecology or in other words 'nature' not only as an important or dominant theme, but there is also concern for natural depletion that is taking place. I am talking of Ruskin Bond. The natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie almost invariably form the setting of his works and reflect his invincible faith in the healing powers of nature. He shows his worry for the unthoughtful actions of man towards nature. Through his short stories he has tried to convey an important message to everyone, that is, the importance of nature in our life. He always emphasizes on the amicable relationship between man and nature as both are interdependent and interrelated. This is why he feels pity for the unsympathetic and cruel actions and attitude of modern humans towards nature. In fact, his empathy with nature and his animals comes through in this unique collection of stories and poems. His prose invariably emerges as nature friendly leaving a strong warmth, love and security in the hearts of the readers. He forges an intimate relationship with the Himalayas and his fiction seems a magic casement opening on a beautiful vast stretch of nature.

He preaches through his works the significance of landscape and peculiar ethos through carefully mastered words. His stories breathe a deep love for nature and people. He presents highly mesmerizing descriptions about the flora and fauna of the Himalayas. Many of the Bond's stories are set in Landour Cantonment in the upper reaches of Mussoorie. His works will forever preserve the tranquility, beauty and serenity of the Garhwal Himalayas. Detailed descriptions of ravines, slopes, valleys, brooks and

forests with great geographical accuracy are due to his natural familiarity with the region. As a child, he spent long childhood days in Mussoorie imbibing a love for nature from his grandfather. 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.

DISCUSSION

The highly deteriorating condition of the Himalayan region was not a welcome change for a nature lover like Bond who couldn't stop to talk of it in his writings especially stories. Recently, though heavy emphasis was laid on saving the trees yet the actual progress has been very insignificant and negligible. Even today, the trees are destroyed and cut down ruthlessly sans replacement and thought for a better future. Overgrazing and ruthless assault on herbs causes damage to the meadows and pastures. The absence of forests will finally lead to less precipitation in the form of rain and snow leaving the grand beautiful awe inspiring peaks without their white mantle. Thus, dryness will harm the essence of humans. Bond rejects the inconsistent material progress because it exhorts the vital sap of human sensibility and turns them into 'machine fuckings' lifelessly strutting in the streets.

He has written over three hundred short stories. Though he brings a vivid picture of the Himalaya yet he deals with different aspects of this region – from natural beauty to recent environmental degradation. I have selected following three short stories here for the eco-critical analysis in this paper: *Dust on the Mountains*, *Tiger*, *Tiger Burning Bright* and *The Last Tonga Ride*.

The story *Dust on the Mountain* narrates how money-mongers lure simple, hill people. The story unravels the sordid picture of the '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 of their leaves to feed cattle⁵

The narrator relates the death of trees to the painful death of his own brother in an accident.

It was just coming into its own this year, now cut down in its prime youth like my young brother on the road to Delhi last month: both victim of roads, the tree killed by P.W.D., my brother by a truck⁶.

Dust on the Mountain focuses on Bisnu, a boy, whose search for job enabled him to learn the importance of trees. His place is shown as such to receive no rainfall. This is again the outcome of ruthless deforestation. The campers make a fire and forget to extinguish it which sometimes becomes the cause of huge fire. This way, thousands of Himalayan trees perished in the flames. Oaks, deodars, maples, pine trees that had taken centuries to grow got ruthlessly damaged and destroyed in the fire. There was no one to extinguish it. It takes days to die down by itself. Due to this carelessness on people's part, many valuable trees are lost. Though such incidents are common on the Himalayas yet people have not learnt the lesson and fail to do their duty without realizing that it is they who are going to be affected of such acts.

The sight of ravaged hills is so pathetic that no bird comes to warble. Thousand-year-old rocks are blown by dynamite. Their dust is stifling trees, grass, shrubs and flowers far and wide. Horn of the truck and dynamite explosions toll the knell of death and disaster in the hills. Dryness caused tremendous decrease in production of food and fruits. Hence, Bisnu went to town to earn. After working at a tea stall, Bisnu and his friend Chittru went to a quarry to find work. Chittru had already been there unfortunately when the place was full of wild strawberries for which he used to come, but now except a few skeletons of trees everything else had gone. As they approached the quarries, a blast shook the hillside which explains the disappearance of the trees. One day when Pritam, the truck driver, had met with an accident on the mountain road, it was a tree which had saved him from death. After this incident both – Pritam and Bisnu – realized, "It's better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it". While returning home to work on their own land, they understood the significance of growing trees and safeguarding not only their own essence but also posterity.

One should not misconstrue Bond as being against development. He is not blind to the grimace of life, but he is deadly against the thoughtless pursuit of materialism at the cost of environment. He 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 falls the shadow of a tree⁷.

Trees are the manifestation of god's benediction. For youngsters they are the playmate and for the elders the sharer of their joys and sorrows. They preserve the lost gems of childhood and youth. Trees are the archetypes of friendship. This relationship is completely free from the stylistic ways of other worldly relationships.

Besides flora, Bond in many of his documentary-cum-stories, focuses upon the extinction of tigers and leopards. He strongly opines that tiger and other animals are not so dangerous as man of the

plain thinks of them. Bond's compassion and understanding of the wild animals, and in particular, man's close relationship with them is part of his vision of life and therefore it is something to be felt and experienced.

This wonder and wild essence of the world of animals has been captured with deep empathy in the story of an old, wise and crafty tiger who has survived all attempts on his life in *Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright*. The tiger comes fully alive in the detailed sympathetic description in the story:

Although the tiger had passed the prime of his life, he had lost none of his majesty. His muscles rippled beneath the golden yellow of his coat, and he walked through the long grass with the confidence of one who knew that he was still a king, even though his subjects were fewer. His great head pushed through the foliage, and it was only his tail, swinging high, that showed occasionally above the sea of grass.⁸

Such vivid sketch of the wild fearful creature could have been drawn only by someone like Ruskin Bond, a genuine lover of nature. As if to prove the all pervading communion of the creations of God, Bond discloses that the tiger in the above mentioned story is full of understanding and kindness for the little boy Ramu. While wandering in the forest Ramu climbs a Mahua tree and starts plucking the flowers, throwing them to the ground. But presently he is not alone. A young bear appears perhaps by sensing the smell of the flower. The bear laying himself on a branch of the tree soon sees Ramu, and as it is, like most animals, the bear also is afraid of the man.

The startled bear tumbled out of the tree, dropped through the branches for a distance of some fifteen feet, and landed with a thud in a heap of dry leaves.

But within a few seconds, the boy Ramu who was hardly afraid and full of laughter for the young bear, is in the vicinity of the mother bear. However, the old tiger who is asleep in the nearby bush not far away, bounds towards the spot.

He was in a bad mood, and his loud-‘A-Oonh!’ made his displeasure quite clear. The bear turned and ran...

Thus the tiger rescues Ramu, and saves his life. Later, when the old tiger's life is in danger, due to the arrival of hunters, Ramu feels that he owes his life to the tiger, warns him of the impending doom hovering over his life, by circling the area, and hanging up bits and pieces of old clothing on small trees and bushes. The unknown bond between Ramu and the tiger, i.e., in other words the unseen sacred bond between human and wild life as also the mutual suspicion between man and the beast is beautifully brought out in this kind act of Ramu.

Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright, is, in fact not a short story about a tiger, it is a story about all tigers and all wild animals. It is also about the harmony in the forest. The foray made by Ramu and his companion into the wild is essentially a foray into man's past, a discovery of the essential harmony of the universe. It should be apparent that Bond imbibed the vision of universal harmony. 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.

Nature's harmony encompasses all creatures, great and small, beautiful and ugly, strong and weak, and Bond accepts the ultimate truth of nature with humility. Such sensuousness with which Bond loves life in various forms and loves nature in myriad configurations is evident in all his writings. Stories hang about Bond that his plots and characters pour out of his routine walks. He enjoys the sight of pebbles in the clear stream and portrays his joy in the writings. Such scenes have a perfect harmony, though transient, yet permanent; though sensory, yet spiritual. This association has been reflected in myriad forms. Bond's absolute perception is a part of his spiritual awakening, which he recalls in his memoir passionately. In one of his columns in *The Telegraph* he recapitulates the precious moment:

Late one evening, when I was feeling particularly depressed. I went out for a walk along the sea front...I was alone in a wild wasteland of wind and water. And then something touched me, something from the elements took hold of my heart, and all the suffering went out of my head. I felt as free and virile as the wind. I said, "I will be a writer."⁹

He reinforces the Vedantic philosophy of 'Adavita' by perceiving the one and the only one undiminished flame in all things great and small. He feels the power of the sky, the earth and of a small cherry seed alike. Ruskin's basic mission in his stories is to emphasize the friendly relationship between man and nature. Ruskin Bond touches on a very burning issue in a very light manner. Another story of his that forwards a contemporary relevant theme that concerns us all is *The Last Tonga Ride*. The protagonist in the story returns to his old paternal house to revive his relationship with the tree. Its friendly touch, even after the lapse of many decades replenishes his heart:

As I climbed, it seemed as though someone was helping me. Invisible hands, the hands of a spirit in the tree touched me and helped me climb.¹⁰

As a man he feels his own self being controlled by its gentle force. It comforts his agitated mind. I try to feign anger, but it is a glorious fresh and spirited morning impossible to feel angry.

The creeper at his window, birds at the sill, fragrance of the earth at the touch of first shower, the clouds hanging over hills, the moon lit night, the stars overhead, absorb the weariness and fret of his life. Nature reveals her secret splendour through all such physical visions. It would be no exaggeration if we say that in Bond the unknown becomes familiar and the mysterious becomes apparent. Bond's attitude to nature 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

From the above illustrations and discussions it becomes palpably clear that Bond is a committed ecologist taking bio-diverse themes with love for nature and the passion for conservation of ecology which is not something borrowed or acquired, but is innate and instinctive. For Bond, each drop of water, coming with the rain or flowing with the river, is Nature's bounty and therefore divine:

EACH DROP REPRESENTS A little bit of creation-and of life itself.¹¹

On the whole, Ruskin's stories breathe his great love and sincere concern for nature which takes care of us like our mothers. 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 eco-critical 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.

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