

Man and Nature: An Eco-critical Study of Ruskin Bond's Selected Short Stories

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The relation of nature and human being is as old as the human race. Literature, being the mirror of society, always reflects the relationship between man and nature since we cannot conceive human life without nature. There has always been a harmonious relation between man and nature but the advent of industrial revolution and modern technology, the exploitation of nature began incessantly and ruthlessly. Consequently mankind, today, is facing a terrible environmental crisis and ecological imbalance all over the planet. Literature has always represented the issues of human life whether it is social, political, economical and scientific or technological as a mediator between humanity and the environment. Ruskin Bond is the foremost one among the modern Indian writers who have prominently written about the natural landscapes, natural beauty, environment and biodiversity.

Ruskin Bond, being a true lover of nature and ardent environmentalist, not only portrayed the natural and beautiful landscapes and the scenic beauty of the Himalayan flora and fauna also raised the issues of environmental crisis and ecological imbalance caused by the too much deforestation and irrational industrialization. His stories perceive and contemplate the symbiotic and reciprocal relationship between man and nature. They also throw light on the shared relationship between human development and the manner in which the environment impacts it. In his stories such as *In the present research paper the three short stories of Ruskin Bond namely *The Cherry Tree*, *Dust on the Mountain* and *How Far is the River* will be under taken for study in which he arouses environmental concerns through his characters who directly interact with flora and fauna i.e. animals, trees, birds, flowers and the simple hill*

folk being eco-conscious and environmental defenders. The Present research paper attempts to explore the interdependent relationship and co-existence of man and nature along with the callous effects of inconsiderate human exploitation of nature and thereby inviting environmental crisis and ecological imbalance through the lens of Eco-critical theory i.e. the interdisciplinary study of the relationship between literature and the environment.

Ruskin Bond has a close and deep understanding of nature in his writings. He deals with simple people and Nature and time is depicted as the catalyst of change. He has been perceived as the Indian 'William Wordsworth' who was hailed as 'the high priest of Nature'. His descriptions of the flora and fauna of Himalayas are truly fascinating. *The Cherry Tree* is one of Ruskin Bond's short stories that reveal man's special relation with nature. The story revolves around Rakesh, a six year old boy. He lives with his grandfather in Mussorie. He reads newspaper for his grandfather. In return, his grandfather tells him interesting stories. One day, while returning from school, he buys some cherries. He eats them all the way. On his grandfather's advice, he plants a cherry seed in the shady corner of the garden. Later he forgets all about it.

One spring morning, Rakesh finds a well rooted cherry plant. He is very pleased. He shows very much interest in the plant. One day, a goat eats all the leaves. Rakesh is very upset. His grandfather assures him that it will grow. Later a grass cutting woman cuts the cherry plant into two. He gives up all the hopes. But the cherry tree has no intention of dying. Rakesh grows with the tree. When he is eight, the cherry tree has grown up to his chest. He finds some visitors to the tree. They are small insects, bees and birds. His grandfather shows him blossoms too. A year later, the tree becomes taller than Rakesh and even his grandfather. Rakesh plays happily climbing the tree and eating the cherry fruits. His grandfather takes rest under the shade of the tree. Rakesh and his grandfather enjoy the very presence of the tree and their conversation goes thus, 'There is just the right amount of shade here,' said grandfather. 'And I like looking at the leaves.' 'They're pretty

leaves,' said Rakesh. 'And they are always ready to dance, if there's breeze.' '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?'

Rakesh is puzzled how a small seed can grow into such a big tree. He wonders at the ways of god. Thus Ruskin Bond tells us how a small boy nurtures a tree, grows with it and develops a special bond with it. The story has the theme of struggle, resilience, dedication, conflict, growth, responsibility and pride. Just as an individual struggles in life so too does the cherry tree. The most interesting thing is the buoyancy that the cherry tree shows. It is as if the cherry tree declines to be overpowered by life. Thus, the story teaches the young minds the necessity of protecting ecosystems which brings benefits to society. Ecosystems are indispensable to our well-being and prosperity as they provide us with food, fresh air and water. Ecosystems also offer us an excellent outdoor recreation. Children love to read or listen to stories. Stories give them an opportunity to explore their own cultural roots, traditions and values. Rather than teaching them directly the advantages of planting trees, it's better to tell them stories like *The Cherry Tree* which will have an indirect impact upon them and they will unconsciously learn the message.

Bond's shorts stories have sincere concerns about nature, biodiversity and ecology. He is not against the irrational and unplanned urbanization or industrialization, but man should proceed in this direction with cautions deliberation for it is nature which can endows man a meaningful and healthy existence which the author implicitly suggests. I think Bond has created a land mark in his writings in raising environmental and ecological consciousness which are very pertinent in today's world when our mother earth is in peril. Bond's *Dust on the Mountains* is the story of a young boy Binsu, lives with his younger sister and mother in a very

small village of Tehri Garhwal. The village is in the hills, right in the lap of nature surrounded by oak, deodar, maple, pine and apricot trees, working hard on his farmland. . Bisnu's place is shown as such to receive no rainfall as the outcome of ruthless deforestation. Other than deforestation, trees have perished and are perishing due to our carelessness, too. 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 get now 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.

Looking for a job once, he comes to a limestone quarry; and is appalled to see the destruction the mining industry has done to the lovely mountains! He feels for the trees that have been knocked down and the land that has been raided of its natural beauty as it is stripped of its treasures for human benefit. Eventually when he gets a chance to make a choice about staying on in the big city or going back home; he makes the wise decision to go back home and cultivate his land. When asked why he would prefer going back to his hills where he would hardly have a chance of getting any work; he answers "*It is better to grow things on the land than blast things out of it.*" And that, if you ask me, is the biggest takeaway of this beautiful story!

Apart from the fact that it is a humble story highlighting the importance of hard work and the basic goodness of human nature, *Dust on the Mountain* is also a colourful journey that the reader takes through the eyes of our young protagonist. The change from the boy's homeland to the big city is beautifully portrayed; and so is the complexity of human nature – where on the one hand he meets kind hearted, good natured people, on the other hand he sees first hand, the dire consequences of man's greed to take from Mother Nature whatever he can, in any which way he can! In this way, the story ends with a shift in perspective, as a materialistic character, Pritam Singh, is saved by a tree and realizes the life-sustaining importance of nature, leading him to embrace conservation over destruction.

How Far Is the River is another popular story by Ruskin Bond in which the exploration of nature is highlighted. It portrays the psychology of a 12-year-old boy who longs to go out and discover nature. The boy is young and the river is small but the mountain is high. The mountain conceals the river and so the boy has never seen the river but has heard a great deal about it, of the fish in its waters, of its rocks and currents and waterfalls. The boy feels a great desire to touch the water of the river and 'know it personally'. One day his parents go out and he is sure that they will not come back home till late in the evening. So he decides to go and see the river. He takes a loaf of bread from his house and starts his journey to the river. He takes the steep path which goes round the mountain and which is frequently used by the wood cutters, milkmen, mule drivers etc. On his way, he meets a woodcutter, who is concerned about the boy when he expresses his desire to walk seven miles to reach the river. Then he enters a beautiful valley, where he meets a grass cutting girl with no clear idea about the distance to the river. Later he sees a shepherd boy with whom he walks for a while. Afterwards he is left alone again with no river in the sight. Far away from home, he begins to feel disappointed somehow. However, he does not give up as he walks more than half of the destination and if he fails to trace the river now, he will be ashamed of his experience. He walks alone on the hard, dusty and snowy path. Suddenly the silence is broken by the roaring sound of the river. The boy is delighted by the sight of the river, which he has longed to see and he runs into it till he is ankle deep in water and enjoys the feel of the cold, blue, white and wonderful water. So, with great determination, the adventurous boy fulfils his desire of seeing and feeling the river.

Hence, *How Far Is the River* describes the irresistible desire of the young boy to explore nature. It teaches children to discover the beauty of nature and learn to explore it, instead of becoming addicts of TV, computers, and electronic gadgets. The dwindling patches of greenery around them deprive them of the opportunity to connect with nature. The close association with nature helps children to develop an awareness and curiosity about things around them, while at the same time it increases

their attention span and ability to learn. Children must be told about the need to love and conserve nature as it helps them to become responsible citizens and better custodians of the Earth.

Conclusion

Thus, Ruskin Bond's short stories are replete with his sincere love for flora and fauna and thereby Ruskin Bond shows his serious apprehension for irrational exploitation of the natural resources and the ruin of biodiversity which is the main source of human life upon this planet earth. The objects of nature are living characters of his stories. He has a deep love for them. He interacts with them and cares for them. He makes us realise our duty and responsibility towards nature. Thus, he evokes ecological consciousness through his short stories. His works reflect his ardent conviction in the healing powers of nature. His major concern is his worry for the inconsiderate actions of man towards nature. Through his short stories for children he has tried to emphasize the significance of nature in our life. Man and nature are interdependent in their co-existence.

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