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ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THE SHORTER FICTION OF RUSKIN BOND

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ABSTRACT

Ruskin Bond raises many a crucial ecological issue in his shorter fiction. He is a champion of the ecosystem (prakrithi) which is a mute and hapless sufferer in man's brutal war with nature. His tales are elegies in prose which register his protest against the hazards of urbanization to the environment. Bond's ecocentric 'religion' promulgates the sacredness of nature. His ideology is antithetical to the anthropocentric perspective of the West. The root of all evils lies in humankind's alienation from its original unity with nature. The remedy lies in a reunion between humankind and environment. This paper seeks to examine Bond's preoccupation with ecological concerns." The Leopard", "Death of the Trees" and "The Cherry Tree" are the cases in point.

Key Words: ecological, ecocentric, anthropocentric, urbanization, alienation

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*"Nature never did betray the heart
That loved her".*

– Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey".

Preamble

The contribution of Ruskin Bond to the cause of environment is noteworthy in that he raises many an ecological concern in his shorter fiction. His tales are elegies in prose which register his protest against the hazards to the environment caused by urbanization and industrialization. As an avowed protagonist of ecosystem, he voices anguish over the depletion of forests and of the natural resources and the relentless extinction of fauna and flora.

According to M.H. Abrams, nature writing refers to 'the intimate, realistic and detailed description in prose of the natural environment, rendered as it appears to the distinctive sensibility of the author' (Abrams: 82). A classic example of this genre is Thoreau's *Walden*. Ruskin Bond's 'religion' is ecocentric which promulgates the sacredness of nature and a reverence for all forms of life as intrinsically equivalent. The world is heading for an ecological disaster and ironically, it is man who is the perpetrator. This ideology is antithetical to the typically Western anthropocentric view which is oriented to the interests of humans who are viewed as opposed to and superior to nature and are free to exploit natural resources and animal species for their ulterior ends.

Ruskin Bond holds the view that all living things and their earthly environment, no less than the humans, possess importance, value and even moral rights. In his short stories, man and nature are not mutually exclusive oppositions. On the contrary, these two entities are interconnected and also mutually constitutive. Bond's sense of self is informed by Mussoorie where his roots lay. The natural world is a living thing in which each individual is ultimately bonded to a particular place where humans live in interdependence and reciprocity with other living things. This paper attempts to analyse Ruskin Bond's preoccupation with ecological concerns which is manifest in three short stories viz., "The Leopard", "Death of the Trees", and "The Cherry Tree".

I

Ruskin Bond's outlook on life is quintessentially Wordsworthian. Wordsworth and Bond share a common ideal in which nature plays a pivotal role in shaping one's sensibilities. Bond observes thus :

And I would praise God for leaves and grass and the smell of things – the smell of mint and bruised clover – and the touch of things – the touch of grass and air and sky, the touch of the sky's blueness (Bond:262)

Nature nurtures and sustains him. He perceives a kind of serenity in nature which the civilized world lacks. He admits why he takes refuge in Mussoorie, "a little haven for wild life" :

I had lived in cities too long and had returned to the hills to renew myself, both physically and mentally. Once you have lived with mountains for any length of time, you belong to them, and must return again and again. (Bond:258)

Bond's love for the lower Himalayas is due to the fact that it resembles the English countryside. He remarks: I was beginning to feel that the place belonged to me, that dominion was mine (Bond:260).

Ruskin Bond, like other Anglo-Indian writers is caught between the two worlds – one that rejected him (the British) and the other which views him with apprehension (the post-Independence India). Relegated to the periphery of Indian milieu, Bond opts for nature. Thus Bond's affinity with nature is an existential imperative. Nature accepts him unconditionally:

As I had not come to take anything from the forest, the birds and animals soon grew accustomed to my presence; or possibly they recognised my footsteps (Bond: 259).

In "The Leopard", the protagonist's discovery of the presence of leopard is serendipitous. It is the langoors that warn him :

As I crossed the stream and began climbing the hill, the grunting and chattering increased, as though the langoors were trying to warn me of some hidden danger (Bond: 259).

The narrator realises the cause of the leopard's migration:

Probably the deforestation that had been taking place in the surrounding hills had driven the deer into this green valley and the leopard, naturally, had followed. (Bond: 259)

The leopard, however, does not regard him as a foe. The narrator records his first encounter with the animal:

He seemed a little puzzled at my presence there; and when to give myself courage, I clapped my hands sharply, the leopard sprang away into the thickets, making absolutely no sound as he melted into the shadows (Bond: 259).

The narrator is guilt-stricken:

I had disturbed the animal in his quest for food (Bond: 259).

What is evident here is Ruskin Bond's conviction that man ought to share geographical space with fauna and flora. The narrator is apprehensive whether he is being followed by the leopard. However he convinces himself thus:

I decided against this possibility. Only man-eaters follow humans, and, as far as I knew, there had never been a man-eater in the vicinity of Mussoorie (Bond: 261).

Bond's loss of faith in humans is experiential:

I thought no more of the men. My attitude towards them was similar to that of the denizens of the forest. These were men, unpredictable and to be avoided, if possible (Bond: 262).

The narrator and the leopard respect each other's space. The latter knows him as "the man who walked alone in the forest without a weapon" (Bond: 263). It acknowledges his presence in the 'friendliest way' by ignoring him altogether. The narrator confesses:

Perhaps I had made him confident – too confident, too careless, too trusting of the human in his midst It was his trust I wanted, and I think he gave it to me (Bond: 263).

The narrator's sense of guilt makes him restless. He observes:

But did the leopard, trusting one man, make the mistake of bestowing his trust on others? Did I, by casting out all fear – my own fear, and the leopard's protective fear – leave him defenceless? (Bond: 263).

The protagonist's **response** to the presence of the leopard is in sharp contrast to the **reaction** of the hunters. They caution him :

"There's a leopard about. You should carry a gun" (Bond: 261).

According to a report, between 2002 and 2007, 41 people were injured and 57 killed in leopard attacks in and around Mumbai. Suhit Kelkar makes an interesting point:

Forest officials have visited Piccadilly and told residents that leopard sightings do not necessarily mean danger. But the big cat has taken up residence inside their heads. Every dark corner appears threatening (Kelkar:30).

If trapping a leopard is an 'archaic' method, killing it is barbaric. The brutal killing of the leopard by the hunters leaves a void in the narrator's life. When the hunters ask him whether he is not a fine specimen, he **reacts**:

"Yes. He was a **beautiful** leopard" (Bond: 263).

Here Bond's use of the adjective 'beautiful' is deliberate. It reflects his concern for the environment. He recollects the lines from a poem of D.H. Lawrence :

"There was room in the world for a mountain lion and me." (Bond: 263).

Peaceful co-existence of man with fauna and flora is an ideal which Bond cherishes. The wilful destruction of the leopard is a violation of trust reposed by nature.

II

In "Death of the Trees", Bond voices his concern over the disappearance of trees in the Mussoorie region. Development at the cost of environment is what Ruskin Bond's creative protest is against. He advocates the cause of fauna and flora in effective terms. The decision to build a new road into the mountains disturbs him. He makes an entry in his journal:

Already they have felled most of the trees. The walnut was one of the first to go. A tree I had lived with for over ten years, watching it grow just as I had watched Prem's little son, Rakesh, grow up (Bond: 460).

He misses the other trees as well – deodars, oaks, maples and pines. His nostalgia is discernable in his observation :

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, don't they? (Bond: 461)

Bond's tone is ironic while commenting on the tragic state of affairs. With the depletion of forests, birds and langoors too slowly vanish, the only exception being the crows. What supersede the flora are the trucks, roads, a tea shop; in a nut shell, environmental degradation. However Ruskin Bond as a champion of environment, refuses to give up:

To retreat is to be a loser. But the trees are losers too, and when they fall, they do so with a certain dignity. Never mind. Men come and go, the mountains remain. (Bond: 461).

The gloomy image Bond projects is strikingly analogous to the one in Gieve Patel's poem, "On Killing a Tree". In this story, environment is depicted as the prey, man being the predator. The violation of honour and sacredness of environment in the name of progress is a recurrent leitmotif in many of his short stories.

III

"The Cherry Tree" highlights the significance of afforestation. What comes as a casual suggestion from Rakesh's grandfather assumes profound value in the context of urbanization. Rakesh plants the cherry seed and waters it regularly. His excitement at the birth of the cherry tree is child-like:

"Dada, come and look, the cherry tree has come up!" (Bond: 603).

He looks after the plant with great care. The cherry plant, which is known for its toughness, survives despite many odds. Rakesh and the cherry plant grow together; the former into adolescence and the latter into a tree. As the cherry plant grows, it attracts birds and insects like caterpillar. The cherry plant provides a tangible direction to the juvenile fancies of Rakesh. He develops an emotional bond with it. One day, as the grandfather and grandson come together beneath the cherry tree, Rakesh asks:

"There are so many trees in the forest. What's so special about this tree? Why do we like it so much?" (Bond: 605)

His grandfather's reply is charged with meaning :

"We planted it ourselves. That's why it's special" (Bond:605).

Rakesh' sense of wonder is evoked. He exclaims :

"Just one small seed; I wonder is this what it feels to be God?" (Bond:605).

Rakesh's discovery of the joy of creation bears testimony to Ruskin Bond's ecocentric ideology. Thus "The Cherry Tree" offers a remedy to the man-made issue viz., destruction of flora. If "Death of the Trees" ends on a note of consolation, "The Cherry Tree" concludes on a note of hope.

IV

Speaking of the human understanding of nature, Laurence Coupe makes a valid point:

The point is to learn from nature, to enter into its spirit, and to stop trying to impose upon it the arbitrary constraints which result from our belief in our own importance (Coupe:1).

Ruskin Bond recognizes and acknowledges the intrinsic merit, value and rights of mountains, trees and living things other than human. In the process, he rejects, albeit unconsciously, the Western concept of subordination of non-human forms by the human. Thus in him, the emergence of an environmental consciousness is perceptible. He firmly believes that the root of the malaise lies in mankind's alienation from its original unity with nature. Man's ruthless transgression of the laws of nature leads to an ecological crisis. The remedy lies in a reunion between humanity and environment.

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