



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

NATURE, NOSTALGIA AND GREEN INSIGHTS IN RUSKIN BOND'S
'WHEN YOU CAN'T CLIMB TREES ANYMORE' AND 'IN SEARCH OF SWEET-PEAS'

JAYASREE. A

Asst. Professor (SS), Dept. of English

Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science & Higher Education for women, Deemed University, Coimbatore

aj_anand06@yahoo.co.in



ABSTRACT

Literature, the very reflection of life, a medium that sketches the cultural fabric and the ethos of the society onto the verbal canvas has always been intrigued by the treatment and representation of nature by man. Glen A. Love in his essay 'Revaluing Nature' published in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm observes, "The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world" (237). During the last two decades, ecocriticism has emerged as the one of the most relevant and sought after areas of literary scholarship. Ecocritics investigate the underlying ecological values, human perception of wilderness, and how it has changed through the times along with the representation of environmental issues in literature. Ruskin Bond, a prolific writer, known for his short stories, novellas and poems celebrates the resplendence of nature in his *Book of Nature* thus, "When we walk close to nature, we come to a better understanding of life; for, it is from the natural world that we first emerged and to which we still belong" (60). This paper takes two of his most engaging stories wherein Bond not only showcases the slices of nature in all their captivating grandeur but also peppers his ruminations with the flavour of nostalgia and insights that underline eco consciousness. In tune with Bond's characteristic touch, these stories are infused with a train of memories, some happy and some highlighting a nostalgic longing for lost youth and loved ones. Nature for Bond is a treasure trove of experiences enveloping him in an inspiring aura offering him glimpses of the sublime in the trivial, and enabling him to touch the divine through green insights that celebrate the ultimate thread of life running through every form of creation.

Keywords: Ruskin Bond, Ecocriticism, Nature,

©KY PUBLICATIONS

During the last two decades, ecocriticism has emerged as one of the most relevant and sought after areas of literary scholarship. From its humble beginnings, it has expanded into this powerful mode of research, building strong footholds throughout the world and also encompassing a wide variety of genres, other critical modes of research and writers of all ethnicities. Its compelling and pervasive diversity has enabled interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary branches of studies rejuvenating the very heart and purpose of Research. The word 'ecocriticism' first appeared in William Rueckert's essay 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism' in 1978. It is applied to a work in which landscape itself is a dominant character wherein significant interaction occurs between author and place. It is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in texts and informs human perceptions and their modifications seeking to create awareness. Cheryll Glotfelty in her Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* published in 1996 defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment(xix). Ecocritics investigate the underlying ecological values, human perception of wilderness, and how it has changed through the times along with the representation of environmental issues in literature. Literature, the very reflection of life, a medium that sketches the cultural fabric and the ethos of the society onto the verbal canvas has always been intrigued by the treatment and representation of nature by man.

Glen A. Love in his essay 'Revaluing Nature' published in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm observes, "The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world" (237). Love further argues that "recognizing the primacy of nature and the necessity for a new ethic and aesthetic embracing the human and the natural - these may provide us with our best hope of recovering the lost social role of literary criticism"(237-8). Ruskin Bond, a prolific writer, is known for his short stories, novellas and poems. He has received the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in India for 'Our Trees Still grow in Dehra' in 1992. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1999 and Padma Bhushan in 2014. His stories not only spread awareness about the bitter consequences of human actions that damage the planet's basic life support system but also celebrate the myriad facets of nature. He brings the spotlight onto the mystical unity of all forms of life. Bond, awake to the resplendence of nature observes in his *Book of Nature*, "When we walk close to nature, we come to a better understanding of life; for, it is from the natural world that we first emerged and to which we still belong" (60).

"A blessing lies on the house where falls the shadow of a tree" (606). 'When You can't Climb Trees Anymore' a short story published in Bond's *Dust on the Mountain: Collected Stories* opens with this quote. Said by the author's grandmother, this opening line highlights the interlinked web of dependency that runs through all forms of life. As the writer stands gazing at his grandfather's house immersed in memories of his childhood he sees the 16-year-old daughter of the present occupants. Bond revisits his childhood memories through a conversation with the young girl who invites him in. He tries to scale the wall instead of going round the gate in a fit of renewed enthusiasm accompanying his rush of nostalgia for his younger days but he finds himself short of breath and manages a clumsy jump into the garden. He recalls many adventures and cherishable moments spent in the garden as he seats himself on the stone bench on which his grandmother used to sit when she got tired of pruning rose bushes and bougainvilleas. The writer talks about the jackfruit tree which was his favourite place to hide some of the treasures. Marbles, few old coins, his grandfather's medal-an iron cross awarded for bravery during the first world war among an assortment of miscellaneous objects counted as treasure for a young boy back in the days, he muses. The girl jumps in delight excited at the prospect of discovering a hidden treasure after 25 years. "She sprang up and ran across the grass, swift and sweet of limb. Soon she was in the jackfruit tree, crawling along the projection branch. A warm wind brought little eddies of dust along the road. Summer was in the air. Ah, if only he could learn to climb trees again!"(609) She was ecstatic at having found the iron cross and brought it to the writer insisting he take it back with him. However, he asks her to keep it saying, "No it wasn't the cross I came for. It was my lost youth" (609).

Trees are given a special place in Bond's writings as he perceives them to be a source for rejuvenation and communion with the Divine. In his *Book of Nature*, he elaborates on how the trees shape the life of human beings. He calls them "guardians of my conscience" (121). Bond's infinite love for the trees took shape right from his childhood. His grandfather's house at Dehra was surrounded by a variety of trees. Right from an young age, he knew the trees as if they were his best of friends. He loved climbing trees and many an afternoon was spent in the embracing comfort of its branches as he happily bit into its juicy fruits or lost himself in a book or hid his treasures in the hole of the trunk. Trees not only become a source of delight and a trigger for nostalgia but it also symbolises the longing for youth. Climbing trees is so reflective of the physical strength, stamina and the gay abandon that childhood celebrates. As one grows old, any physical activity becomes a strain. As youth falls, captured in the capsule of old age with its time tested inhibitions, the heart longs for the lost youth. "Trees make you feel younger. And the older the tree, the younger you feel" (34), observes the narrator in 'In Search of Sweet-Peas'. This story sees the writer talking at length about how trees help in springing up an ecosystem around them, both human and natural, involved in some of the most awe inspiring activities that are visible to one who is awake to the multiple facets of nature. He describes how the banyan tree plays host to open air classes, important meetings for the elders and is a comfortable place for the merchants to spread their wares. The banyan also entertains squirrels, birds, flying foxes and giant beetles. The twisting passageways of the tree offer interesting scope for adventure. The pink and tender leaves attract the delicate map butterfly that leave her eggs in their case. The honey on the tree attracts the squirrels. The mango grove, apt for an afternoon sojourn hosts parrots, crows, monkeys and eager kids who gleefully play around or try and sneak in to pluck a few mangoes. He also fondly notes the old tamarind tree still standing strong in the middle of Dehra's busiest roads, near where once was the Allahabad Bank where his grandmother kept her savings. Bond observes that the tree still stood strong. "As long as it stands, as long as its roots still cling to Dehra's rich soil, I shall feel confident that my own roots are well embedded in this old valley town" (35). The story also sees him undertake a travel to Dehra at the onset of winter just to see some flowers at the behest of Prem who had mentioned a host of sweet-peas in full bloom in the garden of one of the town's public schools. Though he is not able to catch the sweet-peas as the school is closed, he discovers a park with Californian poppies and is delighted. "They stood out like sunshine after the rain, and my heart leapt as Wordsworth's must have done when he saw his daffodils"(34).

For a nature lover, the sheer ecstasy that Bond experiences in the company of nature is remarkable and cannot be exemplified enough. It is this immeasurable love for nature that drives him down the hills, miles away from home during the chilly winter to just catch a glimpse of the sweet-peas. It is this companionship with nature that urges him to drop by his ancestral home to see the trees and revisit his childhood. Bond, in his *Book of Nature* observes, "I don't think I could have got through life without the company of flowers. they sustain and stimulate...They are here to remind me that life has its beautiful moments"(152). Bond prefers contemplation to meditation, he adds in 'In Search of Sweet-Peas'. "I'm not one for meditating beneath trees...". I'm just a nature-lover, easily distracted by the caterpillar crawling up my leg. And so I am happy to stand back and admire the 'good, green-hatted people', as a visitor from another planet described the trees in a story by R.L. Stevenson. Especially the old trees. They have seen a lot of odd humans coming and going, and they know I'm just a seventy - year - old boy without any pretensions to being a sage" (37).

Presenting slices of nature in all its captivating grandeur, these stories trigger off a train of memories for the writer, some happy and some peppered with a nostalgic longing for lost youth and loved ones. Nature for Bond is a treasure trove of experiences enveloping him in an inspiring aura offering him glimpses of the sublime in the trivial, and enabling him to touch the divine through green insights that celebrate the ultimate thread of life that runs through every form of creation.

Works Cited

Bond, Ruskin. 'When You Can't Climb Trees Anymore'. *Dust on the Mountain: Collected Stories*. Penguin Books: New Delhi, 2009. Print

—-. 'In Search of Sweet-Peas'. *Funny Side Up*. Rupa:New Delhi, 2010. Print

—-. *Book of Nature*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2016. Print

Glotfelty, Cheryll, Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press: Georgia, 1996. Print

Love, Glen, A. 'Revaluing Nature'. Glotfelty, Cheryll, Harold Fromm. (Eds.) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press: Georgia, 1996. Print
