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Concern for Ecology in Ruskin Bond's *The Book of Nature*: An Ecocritical Study

Chandana Bhowmik
Research scholar
Department of English
Assam University
&
Dr. Dipendu Das
Professor
Department of English
Assam University

Abstract:

Man has revered nature since time immemorial because nature has been his source of sustenance. As days went by and man learnt the process of food producing he realised that he was independent and not at the mercy of nature anymore. He exploited nature to the fullest extent trying to make his life more comfortable and pleasant. In the process he toppled the delicate balance of nature thereby exposing nature to a perilous situation. A contemporary topic of global concern is ecological degradation. Social activists, environmentalists and writers are concerned about the condition of our natural heritage. They are voicing their concerns in several ways. Ecocriticism and ecofeminism are two relatively new theories which have gained prominence due to the social concern for ecological degradation.

Ecocriticism is evaluating a text as per its environmentally harmful or helpful effects. On the other hand according to ecofeminism the devaluation of women is parallel to the devaluation of nature by men. These two theories based on the environmental consciousness have formed the base for studying nature writings in the present time.

Ruskin Bond, the Anglo – Indian writer, is a famous nature writer. Nature does not only form the backdrop in his writings but he expresses his concern through his writings. As he spontaneously depicts the several moods and shades of nature, similarly, his concern for the wastage of our natural heritage is also expressed in his writings very spontaneously. His *The Book of Nature* is a famous work which captures the natural beauty of the Himalayan region and at the same time his concern for the environment finds expression in the pages of this book which makes it valuable from the perspective of ecoliterature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, ecofeminism, Chipko movement, ecological degradation, ecological consciousness, ecoliterature.

Man has always been the child of nature. He was born in the lap of nature and nature was his basic source of sustenance. He survived because nature took him in her arms and nurtured and nourished him. The furies of nature made him fearful but at the same time the beauty of nature mesmerised him. Slowly, man considered nature as his muse and drew inspiration from her when composing literature or painting. Composers of religious scriptures and texts emphasized on the pure and sacred relation between man and nature and warned man that under no circumstance should he topple the balance of nature and his actions should not cause any harm to nature.

As man became a food producer the relation between him and nature underwent a drastic change. Man was no longer dependent on what nature provided him with. Rather he saw within himself the capacity of producing his own food. This made him interfere with the natural course of things. He changed the courses of rivers, built dams and cleared forest areas in order to make place for farms and fields. He was interested in yielding more and more harvest from nature. This endless greed and caprice made man exploit nature endlessly.

The consequence of this endless and thoughtless torture on nature has pushed her to the brink of danger. Today ecological degradation has become a global issue that proves that it is high time that we pay attention towards the harm that we have done to nature and be concerned about the peril to which she has been exposed to due to our thoughtless actions. April 22nd is celebrated as the Earth Day all over the world since 1970. It has been observed as a day marked to honour and respect Mother Earth because we have been ruthless towards her and this truth has dawned upon us that we need to protect Mother Earth if we have to survive.

Based in the ecological consciousness movements world wide a new theory came into being called ecocriticism. "Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint. Texts are evaluated as per their environmentally harmful or helpful effects. Beliefs and ideologies are assessed for their environmental implications." (*Environmentalism and Ecocriticism* 531- 541)

Ecocritics analyse the history of concepts such as 'nature' to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present ecological crisis. (Richard Kerridge 530) The term Ecocriticism was used by the US critic William Rueckert in 1978. The initial inclination was towards the study of US nature writing in the tradition of Thoreau. Recent works in ecocriticism range beyond nature writing and Romanticism. Now it means reading texts from various viewpoints. Ecocriticism is the opposite viewpoint of anthropocentrism. Opposite to Western concept of civilization and nature, ecocriticism places ecosystem and not humanity, at the centre, while the later is considered as an integral part of the ecosystem.

In Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (239-255) the history of ecocriticism and ASLE have been traced in brief. Barry begins the essay with Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.' (239). He writes that the term ecocriticism is preferred in America whereas 'green studies' is frequently used in the UK. It seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial. In the subsection called Culture and Nature, Barry indicates the scope of the debates within ecocriticism. For the ecocritics nature exists really and is not reducible to a concept. The eco-centered reading focuses outside, on the house and its environs, rather than inside, on the owner and his psychology. In the last section, Stop and Think, Barry tells about the Victorian art critic John Ruskin who in his *Modern Painters* (vol.3) (1856), coined the term 'pathetic fallacy' for our tendency to see our emotions reflected in our environment, which seems to be another form of the habit of seeing everything as centered upon ourselves. Ruskin was deeply eco-conscious, the first major British writer to record a sense that nature's powers of recovery might not be infinite and that modern forms of production and consumption have the potential to inflict fatal environmental damage.

The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm is the first general reader in ecocriticism and Glotfelty's introduction is valuable as it provides a background to the arrival of ecocriticism on the scenario and an outline of its concerns. As well as including a range of essays from the late 1980s and early 1990s Glotfelty and Fromm reprint a number of important earlier essays such as those of Lyn White, William Rueckert, SueEllen Campbell and Joseph Meeker.

In *Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism*, Loretta Johnson discusses that ecocriticism has emerged as a field of literary study that addresses how human relate to nonhuman nature or the environment in literature. When subjected to ecocriticism literature of all periods and places---not only ecocentric or environmental literature or nature writings, but all literature is viewed in terms of place, setting, and/or environment, all of which have taken on richer meaning. Ecocriticism is by nature interdisciplinary. Johnson goes on to analyse essential texts and manifestos, like William Rueckert's *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* where he wrote that ecocriticism entailed 'application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature'; Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*; Lawrence Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, essays of Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford. Like any political, religious, or social cause, ecocriticism started out with a simple agenda, to save the environment.

Glotfelty's working definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader* is that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii), and one of the implicit goals of the approach is to recoup professional dignity for what Glotfelty calls the "undervalued genre of nature writing" (xxx). In *The Environmental Imagination* Lawrence Buell defines "'ecocriticism' ... as [a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (430).

Simon Estok noted in 2001 that "ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections" ("A Report Card on Ecocriticism" 220).

The word 'ecocriticism' first appeared in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Yet it remained latent in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting (in Loer d' Alene), when Cheryll Glotfelty worked for its use in the critical field which hereafter had been used as 'the study of nature writing'. Glen Love too seconded the call for 'ecocriticism' at the same WLA meeting. Since that meeting in 1989 the usage of the term 'ecocriticism' has began. However, in the beginning scholars working in this field of literary theory remained very minimal until the early 1990 when the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was established in 1992 along with the Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) in 1993. In 1996 it is said to be officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works: *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. In its first year, ASLE's membership swelled to more than 300; in its second year the number doubled and the group created an electronic-mail computer network to facilitate communication among members; in its third year, 1995, ASLE's membership had topped 750. In 1993 Patrick Murphy established a new journal, ISLE: Inter-

disciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, to “provide a forum for critical studies of the literary and performing arts proceeding from or addressing environmental considerations. These would include ecological theory, environmentalism, conceptions of nature and their depictions, the human/nature dichotomy and related concerns.” By 1993 ecological literary study had emerged as a recognizable critical school.

Nature has been revered in almost all the cultures of this world as a bountiful and ever caring female entity. She is the mother who nurtures and nourishes. The thoughtless exploitation of nature has been seen as a parallel between the exploitation of women in the patriarchal social set up. Man exploited nature and exposed her to various perils but the ultimate losers and sufferers are the women, children and the poor. Women are more in unison with the spirit of nature and they are the ones who are more dependent on the gifts of nature. Hence, the exploitation of nature is equal to the exploitation of women.

Ecofeminism emerged in the West as a product of the peace, feminist and ecology movements of the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The term “Ecofeminism” was coined by the French writer Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. It was further developed by Ynestra King in about 1976 and became a movement in 1980, with the organization, in the same year, of the first ecofeminist conference – “Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s”, at Amherst, Massachusetts, US.

Ecofeminism grows from the idea that a woman's ethics are closer to nature than a man's and it revalues feminine traits. Women are seen in sync with nature, working in union with it, while men have a hierarchical relationship with nature. Their actions try to dominate nature. This view poses the idea that men's control over nature has created an ecological crisis in much of the world today.

Sherry B. Otner's *'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?'* seeks to explain in terms of structuralist anthropology, the presence in diverse cultures of the idea that women are subordinate to men. The underlying notion is that woman is closer to nature. This helps to explain the acquiescence of women in their subordination: they accept the general logic of human domination of nature. Beliefs that legitimate the oppression of women also legitimate environmental degradation. Feminist environmental justice campaigners, such as Vandana Shiva, point out that women and children most are vulnerable to environmental hazards.

The key insight of ecofeminism is that the devaluation of nature is parallel to that of women. Dr. Vandana Shiva focuses on embracing the principles of feminism and ecology. She sees these two movements as interconnected and believes the worldview that causes environmental degradation and injustice is the same worldview that causes a culture of male domination, exploitation and inequality for women.

In 1974, twenty-seven women of Reni in northern India took a simple yet an effective action to stop tree felling. They threatened to hug the trees if the lumberjacks attempted to cut them down. The women's protest, known as the Chipko movement saved 12,000 square kilometers of forest area.

The Chipko Resistance Movement became the symbol of an international ecofeminist movement eager to showcase the subordination of women and nature and women's environmental consciousness. Vandana Shiva portrays the poor rural women of Chipko as the

redeemers of the environment who had put the life of the forests above their own and, through their actions, had stated that nature is indispensable for survival.

A few inspiring movements of Ecofeminism include: the Green Belt Movement in Kenya started by Wangari Maathai in which rural women planted trees as part of a soil conservation effort to avert desertification of their land; the Akwesasne Mother's Milk Project Mohawk established by women along the St. Lawrence River to monitor PCB toxicity while continuing to promote breastfeeding as a primary option for women and their babies; the Greening of Harlem started by Bernadette Cozart, a gardener and founder who organizes diverse community groups in Harlem to transform vacant garbage-strewn lots into food and flower gardens; Sister Rivers performance ritual in which Japanese women placed rice, seeds, and soil from Hiroshima and Nagasaki in pillowcases and then floated the artwork down the Kama River; the exposure of the Love Canal as a toxic waste site set off by Lois Gibb, and her founding of the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste for sharing tactical skills with local environmental groups.

Ecological degradation has become a global issue that is worrying the environmentalists, social activists and at the same time the authors also. Authors have tried their best to raise the consciousness of the common readers towards the impending danger that earth is facing. Amongst the several writers in India who is engaged in this noble task is Ruskin Bond.

Ruskin Bond was born on 19th May 1934 to Aubrey Alexander Bond and Edith Dorothy Clerke in Kasauli. He is an Indian author of British descent and is known for his contribution to children's literature. The Indian Council for Child Education recognised his pioneering role in the growth of children's literature in India, and awarded him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992 for *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1999 and Padma Bhushan in 2014.

Not only is he a famous writer of children's literature he is also well known for his exquisite depiction of nature. He is known as the 'resident Wordsworth' of India because he portrays the various moods and shades of nature in his writings very vividly. He is very close to nature and nature has been a constant source of inspiration and support for him. His *The Book of Nature* upholds his views on nature. In this book he has depicted the natural environment of the Himalayan region which in turn show him as a sensitive soul who bonds well with nature. His love for nature is also because of the fact that as a young boy he lived with his grandparents in Dehradun in a house which was surrounded by nature and his grandfather was an avid lover of both animals and plants.

Nature does not only form the general backdrop in his writings. In his writings he writes about the Himalayan region. His books reveal that he has ample knowledge on the varieties of flora and fauna of this region. This is not possible only because he is interested in knowing about them. It is possible for him to describe each and everything so minutely because all through he has been an avid lover and keen observer of nature. In the introductory part of Foothill to Treeline in *The Book of Nature* he writes:

As you ascend the foothills, and then the temperate zones, and then even higher, the flora changes dramatically. At every thousand feet you will find a difference

in the trees, shrubs and wild flowers that clothe the hills. And with them a difference in the kind of birds, animals, insects and other creatures that depend on the flora. (90)

Ruskin Bond has been close to nature and as a keen observer of nature he has been able to notice the changes that have come over the natural environment during the last few decades. He has seen the times when mother nature was a few more shades green. It is painful for him to be a witness to the gradual changes that has come over. The changes are not something to feel proud about but the changes are signs of gradual degradation of the natural environment.

In his writings he has brought out the gradual deterioration of the natural environment. He tells about the hills which stood majestically earlier but then they were blasted with dynamites to build roads. He tells about the constant felling of trees to build habitation and roads. The loss of natural habitats have put the bird and animal lives at peril. The plants and trees are also becoming extinct. The springs and the pools are now all filled up in order to make place for the growing population.

Through his short stories for children he has tried to convey an important message to everyone, that is, the importance of nature in our life. 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 about the relation which binds man and nature, as in the chain of ecosystem, exhibiting interdependence. He has always emphasized on the intimate relationship between man and nature and has revealed to us that we can never without each other. In his writings we can notice his concern for the unsympathetic and cruel actions of mankind towards nature.

His concern for ecology is well reflected in his writings. The writer does not intentionally plant them in his reader's mind. They come to us because of the way he narrates the scenario around. As a person who has been around for several decades now his reminiscences when earth was more green are valuable and at the same time they make us wonder about what we are doing to our precious natural heritage and is it really worth it.

In the Introduction of *The Book of Nature*, Ruskin Bond writes:

Nature doesn't promise you anything----- an afterlife, rewards for good behaviour, protection from enemies, wealth, happiness, progeny, all the things that humans desire and pray for. No, Nature does not promise these things. Nature is a reward in itself.

It is there to be appreciated, to be understood, to be lived and loved. And in its way it gives us everything ----- the bounty and goodness of the earth, the sea, the sky. Food, water, the air that we breathe. All the things we take for granted.

And sometimes, when we take it too much for granted, or misuse its generosity, it turns against us and unleashes forces that overwhelm us ----- earthquake, tidal waves, typhoon, flood, drought. But then, Nature settles down again and resumes its generous ways. For it is all about renewal ----- seasons and the weather, sunlight and darkness, the urgency of growth, the fertility of the seed and the egg. Governments rise and fall, machines rust away, great buildings crumble, but mountains still stand, rivers flow to the sea, and the earth is clothed with grass and verdure.

Nature gives. And takes away. And *gives again*. (viii – ix)

In the introductory portion of Nature's Fury in *The Book of Nature*, Ruskin Bond writes about Nature which has the ultimate word:

Earthquake, tidal wave, hurricane, flood, blizzard, all come to remind us that we are not, after all, the masters of the universe. We might trample upon our natural heritage, and do our best to destroy it, but the forces of nature are greater than man's. Nature will always have the last word. (248)

The loss of natural heritage is not only threatening mankind but the indiscriminate ways in which man is destroying nature are also putting the existence of animals and birds at stake. They are deprived of their natural habitat. Ruskin Bond writes about a herd of elephants who lose their natural habitat and make for the human settlement. In *The Book of Nature* he writes:

On the Left bank of the Ganga, where it emerges from the Himalayan foothills, there is a long stretch of heavy forest. There are villages on the fringe of the forest, inhabited by bamboo cutters and farmers, but there are few signs of commerce or pilgrimage. Hunters, however, have found the area an ideal hunting ground during the last seventy years, and as a result, the animals are not as numerous as they used to be. The trees, too, have been disappearing slowly; and, as the forest recedes, the animals lose their food and shelter and move further on into the foothills. Slowly, they are being denied the right to live.

Only the elephants can cross the river. And two years ago, when a large area of the forest was cleared to make way for a refugee resettlement camp, a herd elephants ----- finding their favourite food, the green shoots of the bamboo, in short supply ----- waded across the river. They crashed through the suburbs of Hardwar, knocked down a factory wall, pulled down several tin roofs, held up a train, and left a trail of devastation in their wake until they found a new forest which was still untouched. Here, they settled down to a new life ----- but an unsettled, wary life. They did not know when men would appear again, with tractors, bulldozers and dynamite. (209)

Incidents like this keep on occurring repeatedly. Ruskin Bond does not end with the incident of the elephants but goes on to narrate how man scared tigers out of their natural habitat by making

them their trophies. This does not only reduce the numbers of the animals and birds but it also creates an imbalance in the ecology where there is a chain of interdependence.

Deforestation is a curse today. Man cuts down trees but those trees rarely get replaced with new saplings. Ruskin Bond tries to call our attention towards this phenomenon also in his writings. In *The Book of Nature* he mentions about the giants or the large deodar trees which were axed mostly during the 1950s, a decade when India started facing the problem of deforestation. He writes:

The town of Dehra Dun, about hundred and fifty years ago, was chiefly noted for its clusters and avenues of large bamboos,.... They must have died out, or been cut down to make way for buildings in an ever – expanding city; today there are only a few corners where these great bamboos can still be seen. (*The Book of Nature* 116)

Ruskin Bond reveals in *The Book of Nature* that today people do not give a second thought while destroying the sacred groves of Mathura where Lord Krishna sported as a youth. Ruskin Bond laments that these sacred groves which were protected for several centuries because of their religious or mythological significance are now threatened by the ever increasing needs of the growing population. Even though these trees were considered to be sacred yet their religious value is not capable now to safeguard them from being axed because man needs more and more space and the demand for a comfortable life is on the rise.

Not only the giant trees but even the small bushes are held in high esteem by Ruskin Bond as they help to prevent soil erosion. In *The Book of Nature* Bond writes:

Of course, we know that bushes are ideal for binding the earth together and preventing erosion. In this respect they are just as important as trees. (42)

On the felling of trees near his cottage because a new road would be laid down Bond writes in *The Book of Nature*:

Twenty oaks have been felled just in this small stretch near the cottage. By the time this bypass reaches Jabarkhet, about six miles from here, over a thousand oaks will have been slaughtered, besides many other fine trees ---- maples, deodars and pines ---- most of them unnecessarily, as they grew some fifty to sixty yards from the roadside. (280)

The contractors who are entrusted with the responsibility of building roads and expanding them are careless regarding their onus. They are given the task of building and expanding the roads certainly but they have not been told to chop down the trees that do not hamper the building the roads or expanding them. This is one aspect we all are aware of more or less, given the numbers of roads and railways that are coming up to ensure better connectivity, but it is Ruskin Bond who expresses the thought that comes to our minds whenever we see a gigantic and old tree being axed and that too purposelessly.

Similarly Ruskin Bond draws our attention towards the fact that there may be laws banning several illegal activities like the hunting of the nearly extinct species but there are loopholes and several ways and means for those who want to transgress the law and surprisingly no one is punished and no one raises voice against such malpractices.

In *The Book of Nature* he writes:

Leopard skins, they (shikaris or the hunters) told me, were selling in Delhi at over a thousand rupees each! Of course, there was a ban on the export of its skins but they gave me to understand that there were ways and means....(74)

Trees have been revered in almost all civilisations. Especially in the Indian tradition we have considered several trees like the mango, banyan, neem, peepal, etc., as sacred and precious. Yet today we are thoughtlessly cutting them down because we need more space. This increasing tendency to chop down and axe down trees at the slightest pretext scares Ruskin Bond. In *The Book of Nature* he gives us the final warning related to the future that we are heading towards. He writes:

Can you imagine a country without any trees, a country that has become one vast desert? Well, that is what could easily happen here if we keep cutting our trees and forests without bothering to grow others in their place. (136)

The Book of Nature is a book full of precious observations on nature by Ruskin Bond and at the same time the book also arouses our minds from that deep slumber which makes us unaware of the harm we have caused to our natural heritage and are still causing. The pages of the book not only instills in our minds a deep awe for the exquisite ranges of flora and fauna of the Himalayan region but at the same time we realise that the natural heritage and variety of which we are proud today may become a part of history soon if we do not curb our tendency to harm nature. Ruskin Bond is an avid watcher, observer and lover of the various aspects of nature. This is evident from the pages of *The Book of Nature*.

What strikes us about Ruskin Bond is that he does not intentionally try to arouse our realisation towards the harm we have done to ecology or he does not consciously assume the role of a preacher who has the moral duty of preaching mankind the value of the natural heritage. The vivid descriptions of nature in his writings are spontaneous and in the same manner the concern in his mind which he bears regarding nature and ecology also comes out spontaneously in the pages. He does not set upon writing with the intention of bringing about a transformation in the mindsets of the readers. The comparisons he draws between the times when India was a shade greener with the times now are stimulus enough to set the thoughtful minds at work and to ponder whether we should be complacent with our achievements in the fields of science and technology or should we also be concerned about the extent to which we have threatened mother nature with our thoughtless activities and what should be our next conscious effort to save her from further peril.

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