



Eco-consciousness in Ruskin Bond's Short Stories

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Abstract

The spirit of eco-consciousness is often found in the short stories of Ruskin Bond, who can be called the *Indian Wordsworth* for his passionate love for nature. Having spent most his life in places like Shimla, Dehradun and Mussoorie, Ruskin Bond enjoys a close relationship with natural surroundings of Himalayan foothills. He has celebrated the spectacle and gorgeousness of nature even in its tiniest form. His ardent love for nature is reflected in his writings especially short stories which provide insight into universal themes such as the apprehension between past and present, city life versus rural life, the splendour of ordinary folk, protection of the environment and living in harmony with nature. He has an exceptional flair of translating the imagery of nature, ambience and the deeply relatable characters unique to the foothills of the Indian Himalayas into visions through the words he pens down. Many of Ruskin Bond's short stories deal with different aspects of this region – from natural beauty to recent environmental degradation. The paper attempts to analyse Ruskin Bond's profound adoration for nature as well as concern for people with special reference to his short stories *The Cherry Tree*, *How Far Is the River* and *The Meeting Pool*.

Key Words and Phrases: Indian Wordsworth, eco-consciousness, environmental degradation, protection of the environment

Ruskin Bond can be called the Indian Wordsworth for his passionate love for nature. Having lived mostly in places like Shimla, Dehradun and Mussoorie, Ruskin Bond writes with an authenticity and emotional engagement about the land and the people of the Himalayas and small-town India. His fervent love for nature is reflected in his short stories which deal with different aspects of this region – from natural beauty to recent environmental degradation. The highly deteriorating condition of the Himalayan

region is not a welcome change for a nature lover like Bond who can't stop to talk of it in his writings especially stories. Excessive grazing and brutal attack on herbs causes damage to the green pastures. The nonexistence of forests will finally lead to less or no rainfall. Thus, dryness will harm the essence of humans. Ruskin Bond's short stories give a vivid picture of the Himalayas and deal with different aspects of this region – from natural beauty to recent environmental degradation. Many of his short stories are part of the school curriculum in India.



Man and nature are interdependent in their co-existence. The protection of nature and the ecological balance are important for human beings as well as other living things to lead a healthy life on earth. In the 21st century, human life has been made complicated by man himself. The modern lifestyle is full of stress. The present day man thinks that he is too busy to enjoy the bounties of the earth that are beautiful and soothing. We have to spend some considerable time should to enjoy the beauties of nature. Nature and literature always have a close relationship. One should not destroy the nature for any reason. Literature can bring awareness among people about the necessity of having eco-consciousness. Ruskin Bond stands tall among the writers who have been trying their best in protecting environment through their writings. I have selected three of Ruskin Bond's short stories for the eco-critical analysis in this paper; *The Cherry Tree*, *How Far Is the River* and *The Meeting Pool* to study Ruskin Bond's profound adoration for nature as well as concern for people. All these three stories are prescribed for Intermediate and Degree students of Andhra Pradesh during various periods. While teaching these stories to students, I have found one common factor in all the stories i.e. Ruskin Bond's boundless love towards Mother Nature.

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.

'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.

In *The Cherry Tree* we have the theme of struggle, resilience, dedication, conflict, growth, responsibility and pride. It is an extract from his *Collected Short Stories*, the story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator. After reading the story, the reader realizes that Bond may be exploring the theme of struggle. The seed that Rakesh plants incurs many difficulties before it grows to become a cherry tree. 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. 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.

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 7 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. Thus with great determination, the adventurous boy fulfils his desire of seeing and feeling the river.

Thus *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.

The Meeting Pool is another beautiful short story written by Ruskin Bond. It is about three friends who take a pledge to return to their favourite pool after ten years. The best part of their childhood revolves around a pool, which is a discovery by Rusty, the narrator of the story and thus came to be known as Rusty's pool. Ruskin Bond never misses a chance to describe the intricacies of nature.

Sliding down a rock-face into a small ravine, I found the stream running over a bed of shingle. Water trickled down from the hillside, from amongst ferns and grasses and wild primroses. The rocks beside the stream were smooth, and some of them were grey and some yellow. A small waterfall came down the rocks and formed a deep, round pool of apple-green water

As soon as Rusty discovers the pool near the ravine, he is excited to convey the news to his two friends. The secret pool becomes their meeting point. They involve in activities like fishing, swimming, wrestling and buffalo rides. The pool not only symbolizes the bond of

friendship between them but also becomes a part of their consciousness. They decide to return on the fifth of April 1964 at midday, i.e. ten years later to the pool again. Rusty is the only one who visits the pool on the scheduled day. He is disappointed that his friends do not keep up their promise. However, there is no animosity or resentment as he understands that with the passage of time, their needs and priorities might have changed. To his astonishment, he discovers another pool and another group of friends who are playing in it. He imagines himself and his friends in their place. The story thus passes on the message that life goes on, come what may.

Though *The Meeting Pool* describes the ravages of time and how the requirements and necessities of an individual changes by the passage of time, it also gives a glimpse of Ruskin's fondness for the nature's beauty and instils in learners a love for nature and develops in them a mindset to explore and conserve it. Anil one of Rusty's friends has a sense of fun and an instinct for adventure. In fact Ruskin Bond himself has the instinct. While commenting on his urge to write about nature, Ruskin Bond says;

"I love to write on nature and animals, though I have been bitten sometimes and attacked by monkeys."

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. He enjoys the sight of pebbles in the clear stream and portrays his joy in the writings. Such scenes have a perfect harmony, though temporary, yet lasting; though sensory, yet spiritual.

From the above illustrations and discussions it becomes obviously clear that Bond is a committed ecologist taking bio-diverse themes with love for nature and the passion for conservation of ecology which is innate and instinctive. He admits that there has been a tremendous decrease in forest cover, but says:

"There's still much of it (forest cover) left that can be written about and needs to be preserved for future generations."

Ruskin's stories reflect his great love and sincere concern for nature. Hence, we need to prove sincere, selfless, honest and loyal towards nature by infusing in us a true sense of environmental ethics which is the crux of any eco-critical study. Ruskin Bond's writings closely place us to nature and his narrative and writing style help us imagine the story emotionally. In one of his interviews, while reacting on his promoting 'Environmentalism', Ruskin Bond says:

....it was only when I came to live up here in the mountains that nature began to play a greater part in my stories and writing. 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.

The writers across the world should bring ecological and environmental awareness among the readers regarding the environmental limits and the consequences of human actions damaging the planet's basic life support system. They should take a leaf out of Ruskin's short stories. Ruskin Bond shows his serious apprehension for reduction of the natural resources. 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. In his *The Cherry Tree* Ruskin emphasizes the importance of the deep bond that grows between man and tree. Similarly, *The Meeting Pool* and *How Far Is the River* teach children the necessity of exploring nature. Many of his stories are the depictions of the chain which binds man and nature, like the chain of ecosystem, showing their interdependence. Ruskin's basic mission in his stories is to emphasize the friendly relationship between man and nature and spread eco-consciousness among his readers.

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