



ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN RUSKIN BOND'S SHORT STORIES 'THE LEOPARD' AND 'BIRD LIFE IN THE CITY'

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ABSTRACT:

The central orientation of this paper revolves round the matrix of ecological concern in the select short stories of Ruskin Bond. Human activities have a greater impact on ecology due to structural developments, industrialization, various technological advancement and other reasons. These activities have raised serious ecological concerns across the globe. Deforestation is one such human activity that makes the animals and birds homeless and they are forced to seek shelter elsewhere, sometimes in grasslands and sometimes in human habitations. This paper is an attempt to highlight the ecological problems raised by Ruskin Bond in the short stories 'The Leopard' and 'Bird Life in the City'. Bond is an eminent Indian writer in English best known for his portrayal of nature and its elements in a realistic way capturing its minute details. His works eloquently emphasize the preservation of environment and a harmony with nature. This paper aims to analyse his style of presenting ecological problems in his literary oeuvre.

Keywords - Ecology, Ecocriticism, 'The Leopard', 'Bird Life in the City', Ruskin Bond.

INTRODUCTION

India is the seventh largest country in the world in terms of area and has various geographical regions that constitute rich biodiversity. Indian citizens reverend the nature as equivalent to God and worships them. The sun, the rivers and the mountains have one way or the other always been looked upon as various gods and goddesses. The rivers like Ganga and Yamuna are still referred to as 'Ganga Maiya' and 'Yamuna Maiya' in vernaculars, where 'maiya' means mother, for the simple reason that they are generator of human life. *Times of India* on the event of International Animal Right Day highlights the ecological concern:

Historically, Hindu scriptures have emphasized 'ahimsa' towards all that is living. Humankind evolved, more complex abilities over other species do not entitle them to act superior but as the supreme protector. Culturally, in Indian ethos, animals have always held special significance in our day-to-day lives, and a sense of belongingness naturally prevailed. With growing urbanization and migrations, the animal care ecosystem is also getting affected. (*Times of India*, 10 Dec. 2022)

Moving with the mechanical pace of development and modernization, the country with its teeming population had to make way for various homes, buildings and agricultural farms leaving little space for the flora and fauna to flourish. The rapidly increasing deforestation that has led to scale extension of forest cover that is home to biodiversity. Shifting of habitat towards humans' habitation is comparatively easier for birds than animals.

A critical approach in literature that is based on the examination of literature from ecological and environmental point of view is ecocriticism. M.H. Abrams defines Ecocriticism by combining 'criticism'

with a shortened form of 'ecology', "Ecocriticism designates the critical writings which explore the relation between literature and the biological and physical environment conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities" (Abrams 96). Ecocriticism is studying and analyzing a literary text from ecological perspective and assessing its merits and demerits. The environmental problems being faced all over the world has made ecocriticism all the more relevant in the present time.

Ruskin Bond has been one of the leading Indian writers in English for many decades. He has written over 500 stories, many novels and novellas for children as well as adults. He was awarded John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957 for his first novel written at the age of seventeen. For *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992. Short stories are simple, easy to read and understand, short in length while still having the potential to deliver enjoyment and an engaging message. One can read them while returning home from offices or during short breaks. Ruskin Bond's stories bear a close affinity with elements of nature. He is considered an ecologist in literature who minutely observes the living organisms around him including trees, plants, flowers and fruits, insects, butterflies, birds, squirrels, monkeys, reptiles, dogs, cows and buffaloes. Niranjana Mohanty observes Bond's affection for Nature as: "Bond's love for the insects and animals that make their living under the fostering care of nature strengthens his tie with nature and his understanding of it. He realises that these animals and insects form a part and parcel of nature" (Mohanty 51).

The Two short stories 'The Leopard' and 'Bird Life in the City' have been taken from the short stories collection titled *The Best of Ruskin Bond*. These stories bring out the actual condition that animals are facing with development and modernization taking place by humans.

'THE LEOPARD'

The story 'The Leopard' begins with a description of a ravine in the forest of Mussoorie, a hill station in Northern India. The story is narrated in first person which is a hallmark Bond's narrative style. The writer, while walking through the forest discovered it and realized that it was one of the blooming and flocking areas for wildlife in the forest. The birds and animals used the stream for drinking water and to cool themselves on hot summer days. The forest was inhabited by various kinds of birds and animals like the deer, langurs, red foxes and many more. The animals and birds soon got accustomed to his presence since almost every morning he visited the secluded forest. After some days he came face to face with the animal that caused the cry of barking deer and chatting of langurs. It was a leopard that was hardly twenty feet away from him. The leopard was as puzzled as the writer. For safety he clapped his hands and the leopard went away. Leopards are nearing extinction in India and the writer was surprised to see one face to face. He met the leopard by chance some more times in the forest and they quietly went on their ways. One day he saw a group of hunters resting beneath the trees and enquired if he had seen any leopard. They said that the leopard skin was selling at an attractive price in Delhi. Human greed is the basic cause for the exploitation of nature. Even after the ban on export of animal hides, they knew ways and means to get through the rule and authorities. Bond points out the greed again, which makes the system malfunction and allow the anti-environment actions and projects to grow without any check. The corruption makes everything legal. The hunters had seen the paw prints of leopard and kept coming in search of it. Gunshots were heard almost every evening. One day he decided to walk across the ravine and walk over the hill *paritibba* on which were ruins of half-finished houses made by previous century Englishmen. Walking through the roofless ruins the place had complete silence and absence of any bird or animal. Along with silence he also could smell the odor of one of the cat family members. The smell as he approached a dark cavern grew stronger. The writer thought he had unknowingly discovered the resting spot of the leopard and was wondering if he was being watched by the crouching leopard in the dark. He didn't see the leopard and safely walked away. The leopard perhaps recognized him as the man without guns whom it had seen earlier on several meetings in the forest. Even the wild animals can sense a dangerous man and a friendly one. Bond was pleased to have gained the trust of leopard and he came back from its territory unharmed. The writer wonders maybe leopard was too confident of human presence since the very next day the leopard's body was hung on a bamboo pole and the hunters rejoiced by shouting and beating drums. The writer felt depressed and disturbed at the sight of celebration of death of an animal that had done no harm to them. He has shown that man now a days has become shameless in destroying nature and rejoicing over it. It is ironic that man is celebrating his own future destruction by gaining a short-term pleasure in the present. The writer could sense the silence that he felt on that day in the forest. After killing the leopard, it felt as if the birds and animals knew that humans had violated the trust by encroaching on one of their members. Gulnaz Fatma

points out, “In Ruskin Bond’s stories where animals are the antagonists of humans, either animals struggle to survive, or humans have upset the ecological balance by intrusion into animals’ world” (Fatma 54).

The story began with the tranquility felt by the writer in the forest. With the arrival of hunters, the peace was ravished but the writer chose to ignore them. He says, “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 50). The constant search and gunshots had frightened away the birds and even langurs and red fox had moved into hiding. The destruction of peace and trust of animals by the hunters is pathetic and deplorable. This story highlights the reason why ferocious animals like the big cats and giants like elephants and rhinoceros are becoming endangered species in recent times. The problem of overpopulation being faced by humans and extinction and endangerment of other species shows the imbalanced state of ecology. All living organism form a part of food web that keeps the ecological system in balance. The imbalance being created by humans at any level of this web would prove detrimental to the earth’s overall ecosystem, which also will ultimately affect humans.

One of the pioneers of ecocriticism Cheryll Glotfelty statement describes the focus of ecocriticism as follows: “While in most literary theory ‘the world’ is synonymous with society – the social sphere – ecocriticism expands the notion of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere” (Glotfelty xix).

‘BIRD LIFE IN THE CITY’

‘Bird life in the city’ as the title suggests is about the present condition of birds in cities that are springing up in every part of the country. The converging forest cover has led animals and birds to make their way to human habitation. Bond hints that it is not so easy for animals to become a part of human colony and hence increasing population is threat for animals’ existence, they are losing their homes. Wild animals cannot become a part of human settlements and hence are captured and let loose into the wild or kept in wildlife sanctuaries. The birds on the other hand have quite freedom in this regard as they can exist in the cities. Bond says that the first and foremost bird to have settled at ease with humans is the crow, then sparrows, mynas and other birds like blue jay, parrots and peacocks. Small pieces of vegetation, gardens and trees are visited by a number of bulbuls, parrots, tree pies, tailorbird cross hoopoes and sparrows in the cities. Old houses serve as an ideal place for pigeons and sparrows. Crows seem to be the most versatile animals that neither need the garden nor the rooftop but still visit the human houses. It seems as if it has mastered the art of living with humans as crows can be seen in the densest areas of human population. The only other competitors are sparrows that have invaded the houses with little regard for human beings. Myna is more of a gentleman and likes fruits and berries more than scrapes from the kitchen. The blue jay has, to a great extent, accommodated itself in cities and towns and the eating beetles and insects make it a friend of humans. Bond has regarded parrots as freelancers in the world of birds, as they are independent and noisy. There is no difference in their style and manner in country life and town life. They are destructive birds as they nibble every fruit and leave it. But their colorful plumage and graceful flight makes them a favorite of humans. Their beauty and charm make them lose their freedom and they are caged as pets for pleasure by humans. Bond is of the opinion that anyone who has seen them in their carefree flight would not want to cage them. According to Amita Aggarwal, “Bond’s candid opinion is that wild animals are not an object of exhibition or entertainment. They deserve equal right of graceful and unperturbed life as human beings do” (Aggarwal 59).

The peacock and sarus crane are other birds popular for their beauty and near-human quality of devotion respectively. Bond is filled with great admiration for nature and its elements. It does not serve as a pleasant background of any scene but it is the scene itself. U. Sumathy opines in his book *Eco criticism in Practice*,

Nature writing is not just any writing that happens to mention the outdoors, the flora and the fauna. It is born out of love, respect and awe. It finds its subject during days of close observation of the natural world. It is the voice born out of a relationship with nature developed during those days. It is about the interconnections and interrelationships that form this world. (Sumathy 25)

The story ends with the conclusion:

In the long run it is the ‘common man’ and not the scientist or conservationist, who can best give the protection to birds and animals living around him. Religious sentiment has helped preserve the peacock ... But the wily crow, the cheeky sparrow, and the sensible myna will always be with us. Quite possibly they will survive the human species. And it is the same with other animals while the cringing jackal has learned the art of survival, his master the magnificent tiger is on his way to extinction. (Bond 178)

Bond is right when he says that nature preservation and protection is done by common people. So, it is important that people are made aware of biodiversity, its need in the balancing of ecosystems and for its preservation. Bond stories have often been viewed with an eco-critical perspective since his writings provide the indifferent man to look, appreciate and preserve nature for his own well-being and existence. The upsurge of consumerism has greatly led to exploitation of nature at the hands of man. This anthropocentric attitude has led to pollution, extinction of various species of flora and fauna, global warming, climate change, deforestation and soil degradation, ozone layer depletion and many other challenges. In this regard Peter Barry notes “The point repeatedly made by eco critics is that for the first time in human history, no true wilderness any longer exists on the planet, for every region is affected by global warming, and other 'anthropocentric' problems, such as toxic waste and nuclear fall-out” (Barry 257). Such interference and manipulation by humans has backfired on humans with increasing global temperatures, floods and droughts. The dumping of waste into oceans has badly influenced marine and aquatic life.

To sum up it can be inferred that Bond has been considered an environmentalist for his concern and awareness regarding the environment. His stories portray his deep connection that he has had with nature since his childhood. His stories are an attempt to make people aware of the interdependence of man on the environment. The above stories show that man tries to exploits animals according to their usefulness, which is leading to environmental imbalance. Man pets those animals that are useful to him while they are alive and kills those animals that are useful after dying. Only those animals remain unaffected that are of no use to human beings. Bond has shown such an animal through the example of crows. By depicting the beauty of orange gold leopard and colorful birds, Bond tries to lay out an alternate approach of admiring nature in its natural form, rather than caged and bound. The awareness of humans has led to the emergence of concepts like sustainability, eco-consciousness and green studies. Bond’s works are a message to the readers to acknowledge nature and its role in our survival. It is our responsibility to look after the planet we are born on. The concerns raised by him for nature and wildlife are true and genuine. He writes in a poem about the nature preservation as:

The Earth still spins
And birds still sing
But oceans rise
And hot winds bring
A fiery end
To everything. (Bond *While the Birds Still Sing*)

Bond often uses Nature as a symbol of perseverance, consolation, and purity in his works. For example, in the midst of the tumultuous city life, characters like Rusty in *The Room on the Roof* find comfort in nature, illustrating India’s inexplicable deep-rooted connection with the natural surroundings.

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