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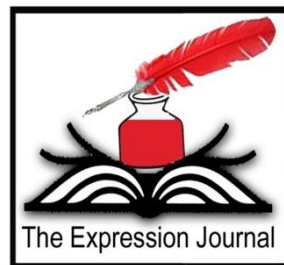


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EXPLORING MAN-NATURE KINSHIP IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF RUSKIN BOND'S *MY TALL GREEN FRIENDS*

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Abstract

In postcolonial India exploration of nature has become a common phenomenon. Modernization has grasped our lives to such an extent that we are hardly concerned about our future. As a result, climate change, scarcity of resources, pollution has become integral part of our lives. However, amidst all such modernism and rapid changes, Ruskin Bond has shown his immense love and affinity for nature and its entities. He is a lover of nature who cannot survive in the face of progress and modernity. In his writings also he presents his love for nature and its living beings to such an extent that as if there is no existence of modernism. In his 2018 book *My Tall Green Friends*, Bond has depicted his intimate relationship with the tall trees on the mountains and also his frequent interaction with birds, and other animals who would visit in his cottage. Thus, this article shows how Bond's work shows one's love for nature amidst the hazards of modernity in postcolonial India.

Keywords

Modernism, Nature, Climate Change, Postcolonial India, Natural Hazards.

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Ruskin Bond's latest published book *My Tall Green Friends* reflects primitive man-nature relationship in a world of industrialization and high technological modernity. We became so much addicted towards the new scientific invention and achievement that by mercilessly exploiting nature we took ourselves into the artificial world of advanced technologies, world of robot and machines. Maria Mies in her book *Ecofeminism* discusses "what modern machine-man does to the earth will eventually felt by all; everything is connected. 'Unlimited Progress' is a dangerous myth because it suggests that we can rape and destroy living nature, of which we are an integral part, without ourselves suffering the effects. As White Man has for centuries treated nature like an enemy it seems that now nature is hostile to us" (Mies & Shiva:93)

As a result, we are starting facing the ecological crisis in our life in terms of global warming, stratospheric ozone depletion, degraded air, water quality, land contamination, deforestation, soil erosion and degradation, biodiversity loss. The world keeps changing rapidly but Ruskin Bond's concerns, love and kinship with nature remains unchanged and this becomes prominent again when we go through his recently published book *My Tall Green Friends*. This collection contains 22 chapters and each chapter is like a love letter written to the different natural elements and entities- sometimes it's the "White Clouds, green Mountains", and sometimes "The Wonderful World of Insects", "The Gallery of Birds" and so on. Far from the technological based madding crowd, he lives in full harmony with nature with the companionship of shrubs, trees, birds, squirrels, monkeys, langurs and the insects. In this delightful critical read we find trees as his great friends because according to him "they are sturdy and dependable; can listen to you for hours while you pour your heart out; they do not complain if you pluck their fruits or flowers..." Gentle, elegiac and replete with beautiful descriptions of plants, animals

and birds this collection is for every nature lover and nature enthusiast. In Swarnalatha Rangarajan's word "Postcolonial ecocriticism builds on the insights of diverse domains such as environmental justice, ecofeminism, political ecology and other discourses of decolonization. Its main objective is, however, to resist and critique the homogenization of spaces, which is a result of the practices of colonialisms as well as global capitalism" (Rangarajan:90). This paper aims to discuss how the narrator revives the primitive man-nature relationship despite being living in the era of modern technology and digital humanism where anthropocentric thinking has alienated humans from their natural environment and caused them to exploit it.

Rangarajan states "the portmanteau term 'postcolonial ecocriticism' does not necessarily indicate heterogenous, opposing ideas held together by an act of iconoclastic academic theorizing. Although postcolonialism appears to deal only with human concerns and ecocriticism appears to prioritise nature and ecological concerns, the two fields have a lot of commodities. (Rangarajan:90). On the other hand in general sense of the term, eco-criticism is the study that talks about and enquires the inter dependent relationship between human being and its natural surroundings or environment. In the context of environment and its growing up issues and crises in modern world it interprets the literary works of authors, poets and moreover researchers who show concern for ecological world and diversity in relation with human society. In short eco-critical writings are not only the nature writing books rather this field investigates man nature harmony and critiques the anthropocentric venture that exploits natural world mindlessly. Actually, eco-criticism is a new perspective of literary criticism that is growing widely and swiftly in the modern literary world. The term 'eco-criticism' was first used by William Rueckert in 1978, in his seminal essay "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*". He defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Rueckert:107). On theoretical level, there are various conceptions under the umbrella term eco-criticism. According to Greg Garrard, "indeed the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself..." (Ecocriticism: 5). Though ecocriticism made its first appearance in the United States of America in the late 1980s but the movement got its voice and world-wide popularity after the emergence of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) in 1992 and after Patrick Murphy's ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and environment), a new journal that established in 1993.

Rangarajan in her book *Eco Criticism* defines "ecocriticism's interdisciplinary dialogues have enabled new theoretical frameworks and trajectories that interrogate and redefine the boundaries of the human in the Anthropocene" (Rangarajan:127). In fine, ecocriticism is a relook at the proverbial relationship between nature and literature that has undergone a massive transformation in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. The man nature relationship has become a complex one and hence the portrayal of this relationship

in the literary texts involves the cultural and political paradigms of the present-day human society. Carolyn Merchant's notable book, *The Death of Nature* (1989), traces this shift in perspective from the premodern perception of the earth as a living organism to the contemporary technocratic worldview of the earth as a resource that can be manipulated and modified to suit the demands of global capitalism.

India is blessed with rich variety of ecosystem along with wide spread of Himalayas in the whole North and Sunderbans in the East of Bengal. The earlier writers like Raja Rao, R.K Narayan, Kamla Markandya have often seen to take interest in nature writing. But they were not so aware of ecological crises. In their writings, they basically admired the scenic, sublime and aesthetic beauty of nature along with its healing power. But the recent popular writers' writings ranged beyond nature writing and romanticism. The writers like Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Amitav Ghosh and Ruskin Bond not just admire nature but through their narratives they express their concern and heartfelt anxiety about the disturbance of ecological balance and as a social activist they stand against all sorts of exploitation to nature and natural plunder in the name of urbanization and industrial evolution. Long after the formal decolonization we still keep running after the colonial modernity that came to India through British imperialism.

Even today though, Ruskin Bond has often been mistaken just as a children author because of his simple subject matter and lucid writing style replete with beautiful descriptions of plant, animals, and birds. But he is first a nature's child and a nature lover who criticizes people with callous activities and over ambitious approach that disturbs the harmony of the natural world. Intimate relationship between human and nature has been reflected in many of his narratives. To say in Bond's writings nature has played the role of a protagonist and we have noticed how nature has always remain the prime source of his inspiration and enlightenment. In the words of M.K. Naik, Bond's stories register a close bonding between trees and humans (Naik: 262). The same enthusiasm and pantheism that we observe in the writing of one of the greatest Romantic and nature poet William Wordsworth. In poems like "Lucy Poems", "Yarrow Unvisited" or "Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth pours his heart for mother nature where it exposed clearly that how nature molds the personality and character of lucy aka human being. His greatest and most popular poem "Tintern Abbey" is called a poem about nature and man. The poem is not a simple description of nature and its serene mysterious beauty. It is the very philosophical explanation how nature influences man and induces in him deep spiritual and mystic insights. It also articulates how nature shares human sufferings and how man and nature are bound together through the immanent presence of a divine spirit in both. The well-defined stages in the growth of Wordsworth's love for nature beautifully highlighted in the poem. In the first stages, how he possesses a purely sensuous attitude. In the second, he gains a spiritual power and in the third, he forms a never-failing bond between nature and him.

The same tone and love for natural environment sets the foundation of Ruskin Bond's latest published book *My Tall Green Friends* (2018) that provides a critical view of man-nature relationship in postcolonial India. In view of the above facts, this paper takes up predominant eco-critical conceptions as theoretical tools and seeks to explore through Bond's narrative the man-nature relationship that resists as an alternative to the colonial modernity at various levels. The paper will also analyze how a twenty first century narrative addresses the current ecological crises of postcolonial time. Vandana Siva argues "Dams, mines, energy, plants, military bases—these are the temples of the new religion called 'development', a religion that provides the rationale for the modernizing state, its bureaucracies and technocracies. What is sacrificed at the altar of this religion is nature's life and people's life. The sacraments of development are made of the ruins and desecration of other sacreds, especially sacred soils" (98).

My Tall Green Friends contains 22 chapters and each chapter is like a love letter written to the different natural elements and entities- sometimes it's the "White Clouds, green Mountains", and sometimes "The Wonderful World of Insects", "The Gallery of Birds" and so on. In the very introductory chapter, about the book he says - "With the twenty-two stories that I have put together here, I intend to introduce you to my friends in these Himalayas- from the animals and insects that visit me to the tall trees I visit regularly; they'd all like to say hello to you and tell you all about our meetings" (vii). Fortunately there are plenty of such friends to be made in the mountains and all making an enjoyable companionship, although not from too close. He expresses his gratitude to God for such wonderful creation of Nature "I would thank my God for leaves and grass, and the smell of things- the smell of mint and myrtle and bruised clover, and the touch of things – the touch of grass and air and sky, the touch of skies blueness." (17). Here we find the true pantheistic spirit in him similar to Wordsworth.

Far from the modern technological based madding crowd, he lives in full harmony with nature with the companionship of shrubs, trees, birds, squirrels, monkeys, langurs and the insects. In this delightful read we find trees as his great friends because according to him "they are sturdy and dependable; can listen to you for hours while you pour your heart out; they do not complain if you pluck their fruits or flowers; are always ready to provide you shade or a place to rest under" (vi). Bond in his narrative remembers a proverb his grandmother used to say "A blessings rests on the house where falls the shadow of a house" (83). Moreover, about the importance of the insects in the ecosystem he says "If all insects were to suddenly disappear from the earth, it would not be long before many other living things would vanish too, possibly even mankind" (7). Many vegetables and flowering plants would die, for these plants cannot bear fruit or seeds unless an insect transfer their pollen. Fishes and birds that feed on insects would vanish, and many of the animals that depend, in turn, on these fishes and birds for food would soon starve. In Bond's words, so "Once a link in nature's chain of life is broken or removed, the entire chain is in danger of falling apart" (7). He asserts that humanity can only survive with the cooperation and assimilation of other living and non-living forms on mother earth.

Bond is a true lover of nature who not only philosophises nature but feels nature at its best and become one with her. In his own words "I'm just a nature-lover, easily distracted by the caterpillar crawling up my leg" (104). Nature is his only religion. And that is why although he tried to live in England, but ultimately returned to his old place of Garhwal hills where he spent his childhood with his mother and step-father. We find his deep rooted kinship in nature when he says "I had grown up amongst those great blue and brown mountains; they had nourished in my blood; and though I was separated from them by thousands of miles of ocean, plain and desert I could not rid them from my system"(52). And almost all his writings are influenced by the life in the hill stations situated at the foothills of Himalayas. His step-father was also a great lover of nature and Bond in his childhood assisted his father in his tree planting with great enthusiasm. Like a true visionary his father foretold which bond quoted in the book "...if people keep cutting trees, instead of planting them, there'll soon be no forests left at all, and the world will be just one vast desert. The prospect of a world without trees became a sort of nightmare for me and one reason why I shall never want to live on the treeless moon" (46).

Bond lives in a cottage at 7000 feet in the Garhwal Himalayas for long twenty five years- "twenty-five summers, winters and Himalayan springs"(88), but when he looks back to the time he first came here it does seem like yesterday to him. His artistic sensuousness is visible when he describes the surroundings of his cottage- "There is a brook at the bottom of the hill. From where I live I can always hear its murmur, but I am no longer conscious of the sound except when I returned from a trip to the plains. And yet I have grown so used of the constant music of water that when I leave it behind I feel naked and alone, bereft of my moorings" (15). The picture becomes more vivid to us when we go through these lines "Below the house there is a forest of oak and maple and Himalayan rhododendron. A path to twists its way down through the trees over an open ridge where red sorrel grows wild and then down steeply through a bangle of thrown bushes, creepers and rangal bamboo" (15).

The man-nature relationship becomes more prominent when he confesses that he is such a peculiar people who opens his windows all the time to have a plenty of fresh air indoors- and if a few birds, beasts and insects come in too they are always welcome until they make too much nuisance of themselves. In the course of the narrative a number of times he says that how he is an inseparable part of nature. One such instance is "Yesterday at twilight, when I passed beneath a canopy of oak leaves, I felt that I was a part of the forest. I put out my hand and touched the bark of an old tree, and as I turned away, its leaves brushed against my face as if to acknowledge me"(88-89). In another occasion he admits "once you have lived with them for any length of time, you belong to them. There is no escape" (52). Naturally Bond grew so attached to them and became a part of the family that he started feels like an adopted grandfather of the family when he expresses his anger over the mindless activities of the people and the fake cry to save nature "I have seen many forests and green places dwindle and disappear.

Now there is an outcry. It is suddenly fashionable to be an environmentalist. That's all right. Perhaps, it is not too late to save the little that is left" (89).

But at the very moment he openly accepts the harsh realities. He reminds the reader that life at forest has not always been happy though. There were times when money ran out. Editorial doors sometimes close. But when one door closes another opens for him almost immediately and miraculously. And he expresses his ecstasy-"when you received love from people and the freedom that only mountains can give, then you come very near the borders of heaven" (90). His love for his hill home and hate for polluted city life has been reflected in the following lines...

I've lost all my money,
And I'm on my way home;
Home to the hills and a field of rocks.
Nothing in the city but a sickness of the soul,
Nothing to earn but sorrow... (54)

Mahatma Gandhi in his book 'Hind Swaraj' his warning is like, "Earth provide the world and its society is working in complete harmony with nature – this balance is a creative force enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed." The ecological system is in great threat and imbalance because of man's excessive greed, consumerism and anthropocentric attitudes towards nature. In this world of technological and industrial modernity, the eco-critical reading of Ruskin Bond's *My Tall Green Friends* makes us rethink to change our attitude towards nature. Bond's works not only generate environmental awareness in us but also project the truth that we can only survive if we cooperate and assimilate the other living and non-living forms on earth. Although that does not simply imply the rejection of the human and fetishise nature. Cary Wolfe takes it further in his book *What is Posthumanism* "the question of posthumanism does not lie in the mere rejection of the human but in the recognition that we are 'human animals' and therefore, in the attendant need to engage in the recontextualisation of the human in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings" (xxv).

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