

# RECONFIGURING THE MAN AND NATURE DYNAMICS A PEEP INTO THE SHORT STORIES OF RUSKIN BOND IN THE SEARCH OF AN ECOLOGICAL SELF

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The European tradition is the tradition of binary, which results in the polarities . Where the traditional anthropocentric humanism emphasizes on Man, Posthumanism attempts to decentralize Man. In that very context this paper tries to map out an attempt of the Anglo-Indian writer Ruskin Bond to work upon the ‘in between spaces’ of the two prevalent trends, allowing f a dialogue between the human and the non human. All the institutional measures being failed in ecological conservation, what is required now to be done is to dwell a little upon the philosophical manifestation and aesthetic extensions of Nature, not a blunt mystification of Nature that Bond is often accused of but a redemption of the ecological concerns from the severe neglect that it has been suffering for the past few decades. And this is where the role of literature comes to the forefront. Adhering to the principles of Deep ecology what Bond has succeeded in accomplishing is to generate the essence of Man as an ecological being superseding the status of man as a social being which can afford to be decentralized in this age of the global climatic crisis. Though Bond is annoyed with the commercialized attitude of man towards wildlife, at no point of time he ostracizes Man from the scenario. Challenging the traditional humanist norm, he persuades man for a transcendence of ego and an extension of the sense of identification beyond the usual narrow focus on ego to a wider spheres of relationships.*

## **KEY WORDS**

*Deep Ecology, Ecosophy, Eco-ethics, Posthuman*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

To say that the present day climatic disorder is the result of the over emphasis on man since the period of Enlightenment would not be too far fetched. The European tradition is the tradition of binary, which results in the polarities . Where the traditional anthropocentric humanism emphasizes on Man, Posthumanism is often regarded as an attempt to decentralize Man. In today’s world of severe climatic destruction a strong antagonism between man and nature has become quite evident. In that very context this paper tries to map out an attempt of the Anglo-

Indian writer Ruskin Bond to work upon the 'in between spaces' of the two prevalent trends, allowing a dialogue between the human and the non human.

Ruskin Bond, the Anglo Indian writer of Indian English Literature, has been hugely lauded as a humanist writer for his championing of the human values, in his stories designed in a simple framework. He is known for his nature writing and children stories and has been ruling over the hearts of the readers now for more than five decades and has been awarded with several literary awards like the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992 for *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*. He was also awarded Padma Shri in 1999 and Padma Bibhushan in 2014. For his valuable contribution to Indian Writing in English, he got Lifetime Achievement Award in 2017. But recently the extensive research into the eco-critical dimension of his works tends to extend his identity beyond that of a nature lover and traces of Deep Ecological trends, paving the way towards posthumanism implicitly seems to be harbored by his work in terms of the amplified glorification of the non human agents in his stories like *'Growing up with trees'*, *'Rain in the Mountains'*, *'A New Flower'*. The human and the non human tend to enter into such a negotiation that for a moment the human seems to be overpowered by the non human, by the cosmic universal forces in front of which the human seems to be a belittled object. The thoughtless destruction of environment thus finds a redemption.

Bond's works thus provides us with a platform that problematizes the divisions between humanism and post humanism and in fact constitutes a new form of humanism that is sheerly different from the enlightenment notion of humanism. This paper of mine demonstrates the difficulty of the location of the works of Ruskin Bond. At the same time it raises the question that where can we posit man and his role amid all this. Keeping in mind the fact that environmental awareness is a product of human consciousness and environmental conservation is directed not only towards nature preservation but ultimately to the preservation of man, is it possible to constitute any discourse leaving the man aside?

But now the question that arises here is why do we need literature for environmental conservation? Why this unusual attempt of integrating ecology a natural science with humanities. And what can be a possible response is because what is required today is inducing the ethical responsibility that man has towards climate which we can call as the eco ethics and here there is an urgent call for the integration of the humanists and the scientists. All the institutional measures being failed in ecological conservation, what is required now to be done is to dwell a little upon the philosophical manifestation and aesthetic extensions of Nature, not a blunt mystification of Nature that Bond is often accused of but a redemption of the ecological concerns from the severe neglect that it has been suffering for the past few decades and this is where the role of literature comes to the forefront.

Here we first need to trace the origin of the Deep Ecologists trend quickly before we delve deeper in its employment in the works of Ruskin Bond. The Ecological consciousness and movements as we know were first inaugurated in America tracing its root to the American Transcendentalism where the instance of Henry David Thoreau is quite noteworthy here because of the amplified intensity of proximity between human and the non human. Thoreau in his *Walden* articulates his fondness for the wild and the woods in the following words "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn

what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” This is an apt replication of the attachment that Ruskin Bond shares towards the non human world in his works. The movements later proliferated in an institutionalized form both in U.S.A and U.K. Later Lawrence Buell capturing the main thrust of the movement remarked in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* about the “human and nonhuman webs of interrelation” Thus this environmentalist approach was born and has been constantly developing since its inception. Pippa Marland in the essay ‘Ecocriticism’ has pointed out that how the simple and naive notion of ecocriticism has developed into deep ecocriticism and later into posthumanist Ecocriticism. The essay ‘Ecocriticism’ mainly works upon the interplay between deep ecology and Social ecology significantly dealing with the question of the human role and importance in the matrix of the ecocritical trend. In fact Katherine Hayles an ecocritical thinker of the posthumanist trend asserted that posthumanism or posthumanist criticism is not about annihilating the human, but redefining the human. This very notion can also be traced in the assertion of the deep ecologist Arne Naess in his proposed reconfiguration of the role of human beings in this ecological network.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

A quick Literature review is required here to highlight that how does this paper differs in its attempt from the others. Most of the research work done in the ecocritical dimension of Ruskin Bond’s work like Edwin Mosses article “*Expression of Eco-Self in Ruskin Bond's The Room on the Roof*” or Ashutosh Sharma’s “*A Study of Bond Literature and Its Impact on Ecocriticism*” basically focuses on the man and Nature unity that falls under the purview of Deep Ecology . What this paper aims to do is to go deeper in this context and unearth the problematic areas like the question of the position of human in this bio centric discourse, the socially pertinent issues that Deep ecology here meets with.

## **3. INSTANCES DRAWN FROM BOND’S STORIES**

In the discourse of many of the ecologists with a posthumanist trend in their writing, the entity and agency of the human being has been treated as deplorable, belittled and condemned, where the non human or the “more than human” agent is capable of making the human as alien. Our task here is to demonstration of a narrative that beautifully allows both the polarities( the human and the non human) to enter into a fruitful dialogue with each other. This is the central aim of reevaluating the some of the short stories of Bond that provide us with this insight.

Ruskin Bond through his short stories has succeeded in conjuring up an alternative world primarily dominated by the non humans but he never allows man to be blocked out rather creates a possibility where the human can descend down from the ivory towers and can enter to this alternative world by subsiding his ego.

The evidence of this can be found in Bond’s short story ‘*Growing with the Trees*’. Here I quote a few lines from the story.

*“The banyan tree was a world in itself, populated with small beasts and large insects. While the leaves were still pink and tender, they would be visited by the delicate map butterfly, who committed her eggs to their care. The ‘honey’ on the leaves—an edible smear—also attracted the little striped squirrels, who soon grew used to my presence in the tree and became quite bold, accepting peanuts from my hand. Red-headed parakeets swarmed about the tree early in the mornings.”*

The above lines articulate a sort of self sufficiency in this world of mutual existence where the human is welcomed in the premises of the non human. What we aim to achieve is not the annihilation or the reduction of the human self but an expansion of it, a redefinition of humanity. In stories like ‘Growing with the Tress’ the narrator not only feels a close interconnectedness with the tress but rather he simply urges to transpose his identity and become the tree itself. Ashutosh Sharma in his essay *“A Study of Bond Literature and Its Impact on Ecocriticism”* articulated the proximity of the narrator and the trees in the following words “ he depicts his sole comradeship with trees. He watches that amid the night the lead of the trees is offbeat; they emanate sound, their appendages cluster unaware, move a little and flex their fingers. He watches them create, tunes in to their insider actualities, quits before their outstretched arms and searches for their approval. The pursuer can see the quietness of the trees and also the sparkling and muttering and moving lingo of the tree.”

This urge of the narrator in ‘*Growing up with the Trees*’ for the transposition or coalescence of the human self into the non human self reminds one of the protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s *The Surfacing* who at the later portion of the narrative articulates a similar desire of the transposition of the identities which is well projected in the following lines “ I am a tree, a tree leaning”. A similar sort of urge has also been embodied in one of the most famous novel of the contemporary Indian writer Sumana Roy named *How can I become a Tree*.

Deep ecologists see the need for a radical reconceptualisation of humanity’s place on the planet. They adopt a biocentric/ecocentric perspective that proposes a “biospherical egalitarianism”(Naess, 95) in which the interest of the biosphere overrides the interests of individual species ,including the human. They believe in raising ecological awareness through an individual adjustment of values, suggesting that a change in our relationship with the environment can only come about through first “grounding ourselves in the dark of our deepest selves”

Arne Naess, a Norwegian professor and mountaineer the founder of the concept of deep ecology states that “*We have the capacity to connect with a much larger sense of self by transcending our ego, by extending our sense of identification beyond the usual narrow sense of the ego to a wider sphere of relationships*”. This cannot happen until the man redeems himself of the syndrome of the extravagance of the self. The self and the other are required to negotiate. Arne Naess who is the founder of the idea of ‘*ecosophy*’ , has provided a set of lens for the evaluation of Bond’s work ,He has claimed that ‘*ecosophy*’ is primarily about the realization of the ecoself but this self is not the ego-self with the small ‘s’ but the ecological Self with capital ‘S’

What is required for this reduction of the self and its coalescences in the other is to apprehend the nature culture divide that Bond emphasized upon in his works as he has done in *Rain in the*

*Mountains: Notes from the Himalayas*, a collection of stories, snippets, essays and poems. What his work aims towards is to persuade people for debunking of the artificial in favor of the natural.

*“ I was barefooted; not because I couldn’t afford shoes, but because I felt free with my feet bare, because I liked the feel of warm stones and cool grass, because not wearing shoes saved me the trouble of taking them off”.*

The wearing of the shoes is metaphorical of the wearing of the cultural cloak, once you submit to it, once the forces of modernity overpowers you it is very difficult to restore back to the authentic natural self and the resulting scenario is nothing other than the climatic disaster that we are heading towards fast. What seems to be vital to me here is that Ruskin Bond in his works has projected man not only as a social being but most importantly as a biological and an ecological being. Bond thus can be called more as an ecological activist than a literary artist. What he has been emphasizing time and again in his works is his self formulated code of ECO-ETHICS. In this age of the global climatic crisis, we can surely afford to decentralize the other seemingly important arenas, thereby privileging the much ignored and the marginal ecology that forms the planet’s basic life support system.

Bond thus commits himself to the ‘Green Issues’. Today the climatic disaster is actually a form of the perpetuation of the dominance of the neo-imperialist nation over the third world countries treating them as the dumping ground for their project of development. Bond’s work bears the testimony that how it is the continuation of the ecological destruction done to Indian ecology by the imperialist tradition and mainly by the construction of the railway lines. This *Fissured Land: An Ecological History*, edited by Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha, unravels the direct impact of the British Industrial Revolution on India. The shikar stories of Ruskin Bond and specially his annoyance with his step father who used to lead this shikari groups is a projection of the huge scale depreciation that was caused to the wild life of the Indian forests because of the British raj.

Bond was severely annoyed by the commercialized attitude of man towards wildlife and nature. Expressing his deep concern for the same he said in his foreword of ‘When the Tiger was King’ (2010), a collection of short stories on tigers, that 20 years from now, a child might not recognise goddess Durga’s steed instantly. One might even express surprise that there were tigers in India once. Surely, this statement from one of our finest nature writers is alarming. Further he says in his short story ‘The Leopard’

“Leopard skins, they told me, were selling in Delhi at over 1,000 rupees each. Of course there was a ban on the export of skins, but they gave me to understand that there were ways and means. . . . I thanked them for their information and walked on, feeling uneasy and disturbed”

What Bond simply urges for is a slight consideration from our ecoselves that can probably stop hindering the process of the natural proliferation of the non human which is the integral part of the human. This is the same temperament which is articulated by Bond in his short story ‘*A New Flower*’ where the narrator is dissuaded by a small girl Usha to tear a flower. Though it could not retain its existence in the natural storm that followed but what followed is the hope of the perpetuation of species

The narrator says that “it did rain that night. . . . . The flower had disappeared in the storm. But two other buds, unnoticed by us the day before, had opened “the flowers faded and finally disappeared. I forgot all about them, and so did Usha.”

“One day I heard Usha calling to me from the hillside. I looked up and saw her standing behind a little cluster of golden star-shaped flowers—not, perhaps, as spectacular as Wordsworth’s field of golden daffodils but, all the same, an enchanting sight for one who had played a small part in perpetuating their existence.”

This is how Bond is trying to make an appeal to the human beings for allowing the non human into their premises of human consideration, which would definitely be reciprocated by them.

But quite interestingly at some point of time One may get convinced for a moment that Bond shares the same disgust for the human species which the many contemporary writers and theorists share when he expresses his indifference towards men in his short story ‘*The Leopard*’ where the narrator is extremely frustrated by the selfishness that men subscribes to and the posthumanist trend seems to becoming alive here again

“I thought no more of the men. My attitude towards them was similar to that of the denizens of the forest. These were men, unpredictable, and to be avoided if possible”

Thus we can see that a constant dialectical movement between the two trends progresses simultaneously. But as a whole Bond has attempted to generate an optimistic and fruitful prospect where the antidote for the apocalyptic desertification of the earth is not the boycott of the human but apprehending the larger design of the universe of which human beings are still unaware of because of their towering ego. This requires the employment of the oriental , the asian vedantic philosophy that celebrates the holisticity of the universe, the gigantic design of the universe of which humans are a vital but a timid part. And not only to the Vedantic Philosophy but it also resonates the Hegelian Notion of the *Absolute Idea* where every thing is actually the manifestation of that Ultimate Reality. He dramatized the mystic union between the part and the whole in his short story ‘*The Angry River*’ where after facing the turbulence and troubles created by the river for the survival of the people in the island Krishnan the young boy who is the savior of Sita the young girl who is the protagonist of the story says that ‘We are a part of the river’, ‘We cannot live without it.’ and thus submitting before the more gigantic forces . Here the River raises to a stature of almost of a character. The wrath that the river shows towards the inhabitants of the island is an attempt to show the towering existence that Nature has.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

To hint towards the further scope that the paper leads us to, we need to consider that, though initially it is regarded that Deep Ecology has paved the way for Post-human Ecocriticism, it is later realized that even Deep Ecology states on the inclusionary policy where man and Nature has been brought on the same plan. It does not attempt to turn the game against the humans. Ruskin Bond has been revered as a humanist for decades. Nature and Man are never at war with each other in his world. Therefore the conflict between these two entities is an apparent one. Both constitute the elements of a complex and intricate network. But our job does not end here. It actually paves the way for the further discussions with which one may come up and that is

counter point made by the social ecologists who cannot definitely buy the vision of the deep ecologists. Some questions are still left to be ponder over regarding the economic adversity that the Garwali village folk suffers from as projected in the stories of Bond and how shall the deep ecological approach here can be accountable for this matter. Therefore the matter is not as naïve as it looks under the guise of the simplicity of language used by Bond. In this context to specify the attempt made by Bond as humanist, antihumanist or posthumanist is still a matter of great debate.

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