

Animal Rights and Representation: the Non-Human Turn in Selected Works of Ruskin Bond

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ABSTRACT:

Ecocriticism is an all-inclusive and refreshingly relevant approach towards literature and the arts. Owing to its anti-anthropocentric inclination, it generates room for discussions, deliberations as well as representations of the non-human entities that share the earth with human beings. Animals have been featuring in literature and other forms of artistic as well as social representations over the centuries, but seldom is their representation or portrayal as relevant and significantly faithful as in the works of Ecocritically-conscious works which give the centerstage to the non-human environment and hence enable serious and relevant debates and deliberations on issues other than the human.

Most works of Ruskin Bond exhibit ecocritical sensitivity towards the plight and predicament of animals, along with that of other things natural and non-human. Bond's representations reflect an unmistakably sensitive attitude towards our animal friends. Many pressing issues as well as subtle nuances related to the animal world are seen in bond's celebrated short stories. A dedicated nature writer, Bond shows remarkable ecocritical consciousness in his approach. His short story "No Room for a Leopard" for instance, deliberates on the issue of extinction and exploitation of animals. "A Tiger in the House" gives an adorable portrayal of the nurturing of a tiger by Bond's grandfather, hence providing a whole new perspective to the equation between the "man-eating" animal and human beings.

keywords: ecocriticism, post- Anthropocene, environment, non-human, predicament, extinction, exploitation, equation, species)

INTRODUCTION: ECOCRITICISM AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

We are surviving in the era infamously and aptly considered by many as the Anthropocene era. Humans have consistently and recklessly been affecting the environment, the atmosphere and other species on planet Earth through myriad activities that continually have been warming up the globe and deteriorating its health.

Being the most influential inhabitant of the Earth, and undoubtedly the one with insatiable needs and wants, humans exploit and abuse almost every aspect of Nature ignoring the fact that we do not have exclusive ownership of the planet and, more importantly, that we share it with many other species which have equal right to safe existence on Earth.

Anthropocentrism, the limited worldview, that humans and their needs are superior to and privileged over the rest of the inhabitants of planet Earth, is at the root of the mindless human activities that are leading mankind itself, along with all the other creatures on earth towards the possibility of mass- extinction. “Human- centered thinking is generally held responsible for the instrumental valuing of non-human nature (that is, valuing natural phenomena for their usefulness to humans) and for ushering in the modern environmental crisis. Some works of ecocriticism, therefore, urge a rejection of the anthropocentric worldview and favour ‘bio/ecocentrism’ which extends an egalitarian perspective with respect to all elements of nature and acknowledges the intrinsic value of all living beings” (Slovic 172,173). Standing where we are on the earth’s geological timeline, the liability to respond to the urgency of the prevalent environmental crisis and to take remedial action weighs on mankind. Additionally, as a species, we collectively owe it to the non-human natural world to take measures to retrieve the earth’s health and make it a habitable home for all species for longer.

As Timothy Morton aptly observes in *Being Ecological*, extinctions are actually spread out over time, rather than being points on a timeline. Hence it is not easy to discern them while they are happening. He further adds that maybe it’s time we replaced the terms ‘global-warming’ and ‘climate

change' by the more relevant term 'mass-extinction' which is the eventual net effect of all the human activities that continue to deteriorate the earth steadily and consistently (44).

An ecologically-conscious mindset paired with responsible accountability might be a good place to begin at if we intend to slow down, if not stop, the steady procession towards the extinction of the human race and irrecoverable deterioration of the Earth's natural environment. The disturbing pace and extent of the human impact on planet Earth is an undeniable issue of concern that has been pervading most areas of academic studies and discourse increasingly in the last few decades than ever before. Despite the fact that the reckless abuse of resources and distorting encroachment of ecosystems continue to happen, there has been no dearth of Earth-centric deliberations and endeavours in most realms of academic discourses.

Ecocriticism, which advocates an ecocentric or Earth-centric outlook towards artistic and cultural expressions grew out of the realization of the shortcomings and loopholes in the anthropocentric attitude towards Nature that reserves the centerstage for human beings and justifies all single-minded human activities that compromise or detrimentally affect other life forms on the planet.

An Eco-critically informed reading of literary and cultural texts can generate awareness about the detrimental role human beings play in deteriorating the Earth's environment and ecology. Ecocriticism focuses on the relationship between literature and Nature, advocating a perspective of looking at texts which concentrates on abuse/ neglect /exploitation of environment and social inequalities at large, hence establishing an activist mode of dealing with texts to understand and influence the prevailing rhetoric and discourses. Pramod K. Nayar opines that Ecocriticism seeks to explore

- . the role of place-physical, topographical, built-in literature and other cultural texts,
- . Environmental awareness in canonical texts
- . every period's attitude to non-human life and the depiction of the human- non-human life relationship in them

. the subtexts of literary works that reveal anthropomorphic, patriarchal and capitalist attitudes towards the non-human, women, nature and landscape (243).

RUSKIN BOND AND HIS REPRESENTATION OF THE NON-HUMAN NATURAL WORLD

Ruskin Bond is one of India's best appreciated and most loved writers in English. He has written over 500 short stories, essays and novellas and more than 40 books for children. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992, the Padma Shri in 1999 and the Padma Bhushan in 2014. The themes of Nature and ecology are dominantly embedded in Bond's works to such an extent that he is celebrated as India's own Wordsworth in prose. Bond's genuine inclination towards Nature in all its forms can be attributed to his having grown up in close proximity to Nature. He sought company, solace, peace and meaning in Nature all his life as a human being and also as an author.

Ecocriticism according to Lawrence Buell is a study of the relationship between literature and the environment, conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis (7). It studies works of literary and cultural significance with an eye to scrutinizing the relationship between literature and the environment. An ecocritical approach to literature helps one understand the human attitude towards Nature by analysing how literature over the years or of particular periods critiques/ influences/ comments on or ignores the natural world, particularly the non-human aspect of the natural world.

Most works of Ruskin Bond exhibit ecocritical sensitivity towards the plight and predicament of animals, along with that of other things natural and non-human. Bond's representations reflect an unmistakably sensitive attitude towards our animal friends. Many pressing issues as well as subtle nuances related to the animal world are seen in Bond's celebrated short stories. A dedicated Nature writer, Bond shows remarkable ecocritical consciousness in his approach. His short story "No Room for a Leopard" which deliberates on the issue of extinction and exploitation of animals and the excerpt "A Tiger in the House" (from *The Day Grandfather Tickled a Tiger*) which presents a whole new perspective to the equation between the "man-eating" animal and human beings along with comments on

the issue of preservation of wildlife, will be explored in this paper from an ecocritical perspective to yield interesting observations in the light of ecological sensitivities.

“NO ROOM FOR A LEOPARD”

In “No Room for a Leopard”, Bond takes the reader on a rejuvenating trip into the depths of the natural world in the hills of Mussoorie. He describes the experience of the serene and private world of the forest with such meticulous inclination and fondness that it is difficult not to get a vicariously intoxicating taste, smell and sight of the forest atmosphere/ milieu as we flip the pages of his description. Underscoring the themes of Nature, environment and wildlife, “No Room for a Leopard” encapsulates an important message on the issue of human encroachment and abuse of the natural environment and wildlife. The story opens with Bond’s keen observation and understanding of the mountainous terrain that he visits on his regular solitary walks. The fact that after having lived in cities he “had returned to the hills to renew (him)self, both physically and mentally” (*The Night Train at Deoli*, 171) stresses his deep connection with and love for the natural environment and wilderness that hills and mountains best represent. Bond’s understanding of the natural world and its flora and fauna speaks of his inquisitive keenness and insightful knowledge about Nature in its purest form. The ravine he describes in the story “had become a little haven of wildlife, one of the few natural sanctuaries left near Mussoorie” (*The Night Train at Deoli*, 171). The safety and privacy of the region, devoid of human presence, encouraged many birds and animals to feel at home and emerge from their hideouts even during the day. The story revolves around the unhappy change that came about in this safe haven due to human encroachment of the peaceful wilderness.

His keen attention enables Bond to sketch in the reader’s mind the barking of dears, the sight of parties of pheasants, pine martens, red foxes, langurs leaping through the branches and munching green oak shoots, young langurs scuffling and wrestling and older ones grooming each other’s coats in the sunlit hillside during his forest walks. The narrative focus stays consistently adhered on the wildlife and their natural world consciously retaining his low-profile presence in the background as a mere observer whose harmless and muted presence earns even the ease, if not

absolute trust, of the inhabitants of the idyllic wilds. The focus eventually pans down to one of the most majestic and enigmatic inhabitants of the wild terrain, the leopard. After a few terrifying as well as enchanting encounters, Bond's narrator had developed a sense of familiarity with the leopard. The friendly/ congenial affair with the denizens of the forest takes a new turn with the arrival of a party of hunters whose suspicious presence and agenda bring about an abrupt change in the tranquil momentum of the wildlife in the forest. The hunters come to the forest in pursuit of the leopard whose skin they intend to sell. "Leopard skins, they told me, were selling in Delhi at over 1000 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" (*The Night Train at Deoli* 174). These humans keep their pursuit relentlessly on, coming almost every evening with "their guns banging away; for they were ready to fire at almost anything" (*The Night Train at Deoli* 174). Thereafter, the forest changed. The unspoken rapport that the narrator had managed to develop with his forest 'friends' was destroyed by these other humans whose presence in the forest was driven by motives which were very different from that of the narrator. "There were fewer birds to be seen, and even the langurs had moved on. The red fox did not show itself; and the pine martens, who had become quite bold, now dashed into hiding, at my approach. The smell of one human is like the smell of any other" (*The Night Train at Deoli* 174). The narrator's affinity towards the natural environment and its inhabitants is so pure that he is almost as affected by the self-centered act of the hunters as much as the animals are. "I thought no more of the men. My attitude towards them was like that of the denizens of the forest. These were men, unpredictable, and to be avoided if possible...as I walked through the roofless ruins, I was struck by the silence that surrounded me, the absence of birds and animals, the sense of complete desolation" (*The Night Train at Deoli* 175). Bond's preoccupation and insightful empathy for our non-human earth-mates reaches a high point in his poignant description of the hurt felt by the narrator lamenting the demise of a potential bond of trust with the fascinating predator.

"Perhaps he was crouching there in the dark, watching me, recognizing me, knowing me as the man who walked alone in the forest without a

weapon. I like to think that he was there, that he knew me, and that he acknowledged my visit in the friendliest way: by ignoring me altogether... it was his trust I wanted, and I think he gave it to me. But did the leopard, trusting one man, make the mistake of bestowing his trust on others? Did I, by casting out all fear- my own fear, and the leopard's protective fear- leave him defenseless?" (*The Night Train at Deoli* 176).

The narrator's brief romance with the forest and its denizens was short-lived and concluded with the death of the leopard, which was mercilessly shot in the neck and the head and was reduced to a mere source of leopard skin to be "sold in Delhi at over 1000 Rupees" (*The Night Train at Deoli* 174). The trust of the birds and animals was hence murdered.

"A TIGER IN THE HOUSE"

The excerpt "A Tiger in the House" is a light-hearted portrayal of an attempt of literally bringing the wilderness into the drawing room. In this piece of work, the majestic and dangerous 'man-eater' is shown in a different light from a different perspective, a perspective that allows one to see it as an adorable companion and as a creature that deserves a safe and dignified existence as do human beings. The attempt to raise and live with a tiger was indeed a wild idea, given the intrinsic predatory nature of tigers as well as the commonly held attitude towards such ferocious forest species. Nevertheless, the experience the family had with the tiger, though brief, was priceless and rare. The story comments on the complex relationship between wildlife and human beings and the idea of coexistence of the two extremes. The fact that the grandfather rescued and brought home a tiger cub though he visited the forest as part of the Viceroy's hunting party, subtly gives a message on the need of wildlife conservation against a backdrop of a world in which hunting wild animals for fun and mere adrenaline thrill was a common practice. Bond in his light-hearted style, reflects on the comic irony of the hunting episode saying that the narrator's grandfather "had the distinction of being the only member of the hunting party to have bagged any game, dead or alive." (*The Day Grandfather Tickled a Tiger* 4). It is an adorably different image of a tiger we get to witness in Timothy when he fools around with the other pets or gets cozy on the sofa in the drawing room or when he stalks anyone whom he likes as a playmate. However, when undeniable changes came to be seen in Timothy which eventually

led to the decision of transferring him to a zoo, the reader is reminded of the importance of respecting boundaries and understanding the needs and value of wildlife in their own right, beyond their role and significance vis-a-vis human beings. Despite the bond and mutual fondness that develop between the human guardians and Timothy, eventually prudent and practical reasons weigh over the desire to continue confining Timothy in the ‘unnatural’ domestic habitat. The final move of transferring the tiger to the zoo emphasizes the importance of giving wildlife their natural space and respecting their boundaries and needs. It also invites deliberations on the feasibility of relocating wild animals from their natural habitats even for such a valid reason as nurturing them during their needy phases. Another interesting aspect of the human- wild connection that can be discerned in the story is the response of the other tiger to the grandfather’s loving gesture. Though the tiger in the cage at the zoo was not familiar to the human who was paying him a visit and petting him, it responded to the love that the grandfather’s friendly gesture communicated. This could be interpreted as the author’s belief that if such a circumstance of connection and trustful bonding can be created, even wild animals are bound to respond. The excerpt “A Tiger in the House” thus, can be discussed in the light of the possibility of connection and compassionate bonding between humans and the wild on one hand and on the other of the importance of conservation of wildlife and their natural habitat.

CONCLUSION

Ruskin Bond’s inclination towards the cause of preservation of the natural environment and particularly of wildlife is apparent in his sensitive and meticulous representation and incorporation of the natural environment in almost all his works. One senses an almost paternal and protective attitude towards the natural world in his portrayal of the non-human aspects of Nature. He connects with and feels for the grass, trees, shrubs, flies, birds, langurs, leopards, tigers etc. His endearing stories are therefore not confined to the human subject but also incorporate the predicament of non-human life on earth.

Jonathan Bate, one of the first influential British pioneers of ecocriticism, opines that the current situation of environmental crisis demands cultural and critical realignments. For Bate, the environmental

crisis is a new context, a new phase of the dialectic, in which the pleasures and desires involved in the love of nature have the potential to produce a radical critique of dominant values (2). Ecocriticism is an all-inclusive and refreshingly relevant approach towards literature and the arts. Owing to its anti-anthropocentric inclination, it generates room for discussions, deliberations as well as representations of the non-human entities that share the earth with human beings. Animals have been featuring in literature and other forms of artistic as well as social representations over the centuries, but seldom is their representation or portrayal as relevant and significantly faithful as in the works of environmentally conscious thinkers and authors who consciously give the centerstage to the non-human environment and hence enable serious and relevant debates and deliberations on issues other than the human.

The alarming rate of reckless exploitation of the natural environment has had an unimaginably detrimental impact not only on the non-human natural world but also on the human species. As Shivani Jha opines, nature's resources and social life of humans are based on complex reciprocal relationships, which when interfered with disrupt ecological systems resulting in alarming damage to the human and the non-human world and that the need of the hour is to return to a way of thought and existence which is more holistic and is guided by the understanding of the intrinsic worth and equal rights of the non-humans to inhabit the earth (*Ecocritical Readings Rethinking Nature and Environment* vii) . The crucial choice has to be made- respond to the urgent demand of the hour responsibly and collectively as a race and make concerted, timely and genuine efforts to save the planet, or to exist away in denial as short-sighted and self-centred beings.

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