



Rediscovering Harmony: human-nature interdependence in Ruskin Bond's Stories

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Abstract

The world today is confronting a global ecological crisis. The environment is under threat from pollution and the rampant exploitation of natural resources by human beings, who, driven by an anthropocentric worldview, consider themselves superior to nature. So-called "civilization" is not progressing but rather moving towards a self-inflicted doomsday. Humanity is committing ecocide, making the Earth increasingly uninhabitable for all forms of life. Though belatedly, activists around the world are beginning to express concern over this man-made environmental disaster. Critics have also joined the movement by introducing a new theoretical framework called ecocriticism which analytically explores the relationship between literature and the environment.

Among the philosophies adopted by environmental activists, Deep Ecology stands out as one of the most influential. This philosophy emphasizes the fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and nature. This paper aims to explore the philosophy of Deep Ecology in the works of the eminent writer Ruskin Bond, who, living amidst the mountains, tells simple yet profound stories that highlight the interdependence between nature and other forms of life, all bound together in the delicate chain of the ecosystem.

Keywords: Anthropocentric, deep ecology, environmentalism, ecosystem, nature

Introduction

The environment, which forms the foundation of our sustenance, has been exploited by human beings since the dawn of civilization. In the name of development, industrialization, and scientific and technological advancement, humanity has continuously degraded nature, which is essential to human existence. Human responses and actions toward nature have largely been anthropocentric, rooted in the belief that they are superior to the natural world. By denying the interdependence between humans and nature, they have wounded Mother Nature and disrupted the delicate balance of ecological cycles. As a result, the world today is facing a global ecological crisis. The environment is under severe threat from pollution and the excessive exploitation of natural resources caused by human activities. What is often termed "civilization" is not progressing meaningfully; rather, in the name of progress, we are hastening our own downfall. Humanity is committing ecocide by making the Earth increasingly inhospitable to all forms of life.

Although late, activists across the globe are now expressing serious concern about this man-made environmental catastrophe and are striving to protect the environment. In parallel, literary critics have joined the environmental movement by introducing a new theoretical approach known as ecocriticism, which analytically explores the relationship between literature and the environment.

Ecocriticism and the Philosophy of Deep Ecology

The term *ecocriticism* was first introduced by American critic William Rueckert in his 1978^[5] essay entitled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Cheryll Glotfelty later defined the term as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996)^[2]. While this critical approach originated in the United States during the late 1980s under the name *Ecocriticism*, a parallel movement emerged in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s under the banner of *Green Studies*. Despite the difference in nomenclature, both movements share a common objective: to offer an environmentally oriented study of literature. This theoretical framework not only examines the relationship between literature and nature but also explores and analyses nature-writing, expands the literary and cultural canon, introduces socio-political perspectives for reading texts, raises environmental awareness, and, in some cases, identifies possible solutions to contemporary environmental issues represented in literary texts. A significant precursor to the ecocritical movement was the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, which marked a turning point in environmental consciousness and brought a new wave of urgency and direction to environmentalism and, later, ecocritical theory.

There is ample evidence of literary, visual, and other forms of representation of nature in English literature. The Romantic poet William Wordsworth perceives nature in "...the light of setting suns, / And the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man." From the Old English period to the postmodern era, nature has remained one of the predominant themes in English literature. In this postmodern age, a number of writers are committed to highlighting issues related to nature and the environment, as well as the role of human beings in sustaining harmony on Earth. While some of their works express love and reverence for nature, others convey anxiety and reflection on the destruction of the natural world.

Ruskin Bond: A Voice for Ecological Sensibility

Ruskin Bond is one of the most renowned writers of India who frequently evokes the theme of harmonious coexistence between nature and humanity. Having spent years amidst nature in Dehradun and Shimla, and now residing in Mussoorie in the foothills of the Himalayas, Bond has been deeply influenced by the beauty of the natural world. In his essays, short stories, and novellas, he captures the essence of mountain life. In the introduction to his book *A Time for All Things*, Bond writes:

“Much of my writing is nature oriented, because I’ve spent most of my life in contemplation of the sky, the good earth and the waters of the earth, along with its inhabitants—humans, animals, birds and ladybirds.” (Bond, *Time*, x)

He celebrates every form of life on Earth, and his writings offer a vision of an affable world where ecological balance prevails. Although much of his work expresses a simple love and gratitude for nature and its elements, he also conveys concern about humanity’s reckless destruction of the environment.

Reading Ruskin Bond is a quiet joy, allowing readers to experience the presence and essence of nature in daily life. His writings reflect the ethos of Deep Ecology through vivid imagery and lucid prose. Deep Ecology is one of the most significant philosophical approaches within the field of ecocriticism and has greatly influenced environmental activism. The theory of Deep Ecology emphasizes biocentric living over anthropocentrism. In *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, Nayar summarizes the central premise of Deep Ecology:

“Deep Ecology believes in the fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features. It believes that anthropocentric thinking has alienated humans from their natural environment and caused them to exploit it.”

The proponent of Deep Ecology, Arne Naess, argued that this philosophy goes beyond the shallow, surface-level approach to environmental problems. He formulated several core tenets, the foremost being that both human and non-human life forms possess intrinsic value and that human beings are an integral part of nature. The relationship between humans and the natural world is one of interdependence; thus, humans cannot violate this coexistence by dominating or interfering with natural entities. Naess warns that ecosystems can only tolerate a limited level of human activity, and therefore, natural resources should be used solely to meet essential, vital needs.

Ecocide and Empathy in *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright*

In several of his short stories, Ruskin Bond intricately weaves a fascinating relationship between humans and animals. At times, he simply portrays the struggle for survival faced by wildlife as a consequence of human greed and irrational attitudes toward nature and its inhabitants. *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright* is one such short story, written in the third person narrative. It recounts the gradual destruction of the dense forests in the Himalayan foothills and how the habitat of wild animals is increasingly threatened by the intrusion of “tractors, bulldozers, and dynamite.”

“There was a time when the forest on the bank of the Ganga had provided food and shelter for some thirty or forty tigers; but men in search of trophies had shot them all, and now there remained only one old tiger in the jungle.”

The story follows the survival struggle of this “wise and crafty” old tiger, offering a poignant insight into the root causes of the extinction of tigers, forests, and wildlife. Bond emphasizes the emotional toll of ecological imbalance when he writes:

“The villagers thought he was roaring in anger, but the jungle knew that he was really roaring out of loneliness.”

As long as the forest’s ecological balance remained intact, the tiger posed no threat to the villagers. In fact, the villagers respected and worshipped him as “Maharaj.” Bond draws a parallel between human and animal needs when he states: “A man needs land as much as a tiger needs a jungle.”

Through simple yet profound storytelling, Bond reveals a grave reality. Human beings are destroying forests not only for expanding their habitation by cutting down trees but also through their careless behaviour, which often results in devastating forest fires. The vivid depiction of jungle fires in the story reflects the real-world wildfires occurring globally. As prey animals like deer and wild pigs flee to survive, the tiger is compelled to kill a domestic buffalo. This, in turn, leads to the villagers’ outrage, and the tiger becomes a scapegoat for their fear. Ironically, the villagers once believed that the tiger was the protector of the forest, and his presence ensured their safety: “They were still secure from the intruders and newcomers who came to fell the trees and eat up the land and let the floodwaters into the village.” One of the central tenets of Deep Ecology is that humans have no right to destroy the natural balance and biodiversity except to fulfil basic needs. In this story, however, Bond makes it clear that humans are solely responsible for the devastation of natural harmony. He writes: “And the trees have been cut, so that between the jungle and the river there is no place to hide. Animals are afraid of the open—they are afraid of men with guns.” The core concern of Deep Ecology, the fundamental interconnectedness between humans and nature is emphasized in the story’s underlying message: once the forest is destroyed, human life will also be endangered.

Human-Nature Interdependence in *The Leopard* and *A Crow for All Seasons*:

A sensitive writer like Ruskin Bond consistently expresses gratitude toward nature and voices his concern about the extinction of species. In the story “*The Leopard*”, he highlights issues such as deforestation and human greed. He feels “uneasy and disturbed” upon hearing hunters’ guns firing. The information that leopard skins are

being sold in Delhi for over 1,000 rupees each leaves him feeling helpless. Bond sadly acknowledges that the current excessive human interference with the non-human world poses a significant threat to biodiversity. This interference, he argues, undermines the mutual trust between human beings and the natural world.

In another short story, "*A Crow for All Seasons*", Bond constructs a friendly relationship between a man and a crow. While emphasizing the interdependence between humans and non-human entities, he does not miss the opportunity to satirize humanity's role in polluting the environment. The narrator of the story is a crow, who remarks ironically, "As human beings multiply, so does their rubbish."

Nature as a Moral and Spiritual Force

The philosophy of self-realization in Deep Ecology advocates that human beings, often feeling isolated due to narrow, competing egos, should instead identify and connect with natural objects and other forms of life. In Bond's story, we see a man who initially harbours resentment toward the crow but eventually comes to love it, abandoning his sense of superiority. Bond depicts the transformation with poetic imagery: "And what a pretty picture he made—a crow eating from his hand, another perched on his shoulder, and about a dozen of us on the grass, forming a respectful ring around him."

There are no boundaries between nature and humanity; humans are an integral part of nature. This self-realization of identifying oneself with the natural world is one of the central ideas of Deep Ecology. In one of Ruskin Bond's novellas, a twelve-year-old boy named Bishnu experiences this profound connection with nature. As the sole earner in his family, Bishnu struggles to survive due to the inability to cultivate crops during the dry summer. Consequently, he decides to travel to Mussoorie in search of work.

During his journey, Bishnu is astonished to see that there are no trees along the riverbanks. He learns from a fellow passenger that the trees had been cut down to construct roads. Although these roads serve as important means of communication for hill dwellers, they also open the door to exploitation. As Bond writes, "Rich men from the cities come here and buy up what they want—land, houses, trees, people!" These rich men symbolize consumerism, individuals who do not believe in living simple lives and who disrupt the mutual understanding between nature and the mountain communities.

The narrative highlights ecological degradation resulting from consumerism and human greed. Even a young boy like Bishnu becomes acutely aware of the dangers posed by so-called progress achieved at the expense of nature. In his quest for work, Bishnu ends up at limestone quarries, where the top of a mountain has been blasted away with dynamite to extract limestone. This image underscores the ecocide committed by humans, who are annihilating nature and its ecosystems. Through Bishnu's eyes, readers witness the tragic consequences of violating biocentric equality:

"The skeletons of a few trees remained on the lower slopes. Almost everything else had gone—grass, flowers, shrubs, birds, butterflies, grasshoppers, ladybirds."

Deep Ecology emphasizes ecological consciousness and promotes the idea of simple living using minimal natural resources to meet only the essential needs of human life. It firmly opposes manmade disasters inflicted upon nature. In the end, Bishnu returns to his village and to the embrace of nature, choosing a simple life in which he feels a spiritual connection with the environment. Other works by Ruskin Bond, such as "*The Tree Lover*," "*The Cherry Tree*," and "*From the Cradle of Nature*," also explore the profound bond and interrelation between humans and nature. Thus, Bond's literary contributions remind readers that they are part of the ecosystem and celebrate the eternal love and harmony between humanity and the natural world.

Conclusion

Ruskin Bond's literary works are a quiet but powerful reminder of our intrinsic connection with nature. Through simple narratives, vivid descriptions, and emotionally resonant characters, he presents nature as a moral, spiritual, and ecological force. His stories embody the principles of Deep Ecology, advocating for biocentric equality, ecological consciousness, and the need for a more sustainable and humble way of life. In an age of environmental crisis, Bond's works call readers back to a forgotten truth: that we are not apart from nature, but a part of it.

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