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Landscape as an Anchor for Ecocritical Exploration: A Study of the Representation of Nature in Ruskin Bond's Select Short-Stories

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Abstract:

Landscape is one of the prominent aspects dealt with in ecocriticism. Ruskin Bond's short stories provide ecological settings to analyze the interaction between humans and the environment. Bond's stories are explored in this paper through the portrayal of natural scenes with ecologically minded characters and oppositional characters (commercial exploiters). This paper analyses how Bond treats the natural features symbolically for human emotional security and moral uprightedness. The paper highlights Bond's role in Indian ecological writing and brings forth the importance of a few works representing nature within the context of environmentalism and ecocriticism.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism; Landscape; Nature Representation; Environmental Consciousness; Human-Nature Relationship.*

Introduction:

Ecocriticism and environmentalism are critiques of industrial modernity. We know that industrial pollution is the greatest threat to human life and existence in the present age. Among the possible consequences are flooding, desertification, deforestation etc. Ecological concern and environmental disasters have led to the school of criticism called ecocriticism which traces the relations between writers, works and ecosphere. Ecocriticism is the application of ecological themes, principles and concepts to the study of literature texts. It allows interrelational connectivity of natural and cultural phenomenon.

The main reason this study examines Ruskin's short stories is due to the fact that environmental crisis has now become rampant and the landscape is seen as something quite unrelated to our existence but for commercial use. In his works, Bond highlights the relation between human and nature to show the value of the natural world in human life. Ecological issues become evident by the portrayal of such relation. This paper explores the Himalayan region through the story tradition of Bond and how he

picturized his experience in Anthropocene age of the modern society. Landscape becomes the symbol of interaction as human life is marginalized socially, economically and culturally on par with the natural world. Stories like “No Room for Leopard”, “An Island of Trees” etc., are taken up for eco-critical exploration of environmental deterioration. The selected stories point the significance of landscape and the peculiar impact of the flora and fauna of Himalayan region.

Material and methodology:

This research operates with a qualitative methodology by visualizing how nature and landscape come to life in Bond’s stories. Ecocriticism is figured out in selective Bond’s stories like “No Room for Leopard”, “The Cherry Tree”, etc., and the qualitative method functions to identify the most significant ecological components. This article intends to investigate Bond’s employment of scenic language, symbolism and how landscapes serve as anchor to stabilize his narratives. Through an analytical exploration with ecocritical perspective, the study investigates to reveal the relation between nature and individuals that operate within and outside it. Further, theories of interdependency environmental ethics and justice are highlighted.

A few nature centered threads and themes stand out like nostalgia, environmental awareness etc. Since this is a textual study and analysis, the methodology depends on both primary and secondary sources. The idea of landscape and its symbolic elements are central to the understanding of Bond’s work through ecocritical methods.

Review of Literature:

Few researchers and critics started exploring Bond’s works within the lens of ecocriticism in the present decade with regard to anthropocentric ideals. Bond is a master in portrayal of human vs nature relationship. His stories highlight how being ecologically conscious is not only good for human beings but necessary for the very existence and human sustenance. Environment is not just something which exists in the background but an active, relative element which influences human mind and moral choices. Environmental degradation is portrayed as one of the major crisis of the modern industrial society causing imbalance of the ecosystem. This nature’s imbalance would lead to disordering and deculturation of the individual’s mind which has become common in the behaviour of the man of the Anthropocene. Bond is one of the writers who designated his works with nature themes, environmental awareness, animal kinship etc.

Researches that earlier followed general themes and thematic readings, now investigate the significance of the role of the landscape in his narratives. It is revealed by various researches in the past and present that the majority of Bond’s writings are concentrated in and around the Himalayan region. He views the landscape as a principle of organization that ultimately impacts character and identity development which is gradually depleting. Nature acts as an influential factor in the unfolding of life’s major events and emotional regulation presenting an image of natural and human worlds not

as separate but included ones.

Recent explorations of the Bond's works through ecocritical perspective extended the discussion through the lenses of bioregionalism and environmental ethical theory to landscape ecocriticism. Hence, a critical reading of Bond's works showcases his advocacy of sustainable coexistence and a reconnection of humanity with nature. Several writers, reviewers and critics have pointed out that his rich portrayal of biodiversity, natural cycles and the fragility of ecosystems gives importance to the notion of conservation. In the present decade, many scholarly articles have reflected upon ecological awareness through the works of Bond. This paper touches upon the role played by landscape, the lost link, largely commodified and commercialized in the modern age as an important aspect of ecocritical analysis, unexplored in earlier research.

Discussion & Results:

Bond's deepest concern relates to the depletion of natural resources, natural habitats and endangerment of species. His stories take place in the beautiful hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie. The writer firmly believes in the healing aspect of nature. His main concern is how careless human beings have become in the Anthropocene age, toward Nature. Through his short stories, he has tried to convey the importance of nature in human life. In his short story, 'An Island of Trees', the grandmother, a prominent character reveals to her granddaughter, Koki – the importance of nature in human life. Bond emphasizes on the importance of deep unshaken bonds formed between human and non-human in Nature. It exists if love and compassion is mutual between them. In 'No Room for Leopard', the story focusses on deforestation and its accompanying aftermath. It also presents the predicament of the animals after deforestation. 'The Tree Lover', 'The Cherry Tree', 'All creatures Great and Small' show how nature and humans are interlinked within an ecosystem. Bond decodes the peaceful relationship between nature and people. His works demonstrate how interlocked and interlinked is the relation between man and nature. These works abound with pity for the unsympathetic, heartless attitudes of human beings towards nature and its bounty.

Kishen Singh, the central character in the story 'The tunnel', seems to secure the leopard in confidence, by keeping the bond of trust when asked by others about the safety of the jungle. Kishen promptly replies about the dangers from fellow men when compared to the creatures of the wild as "it is safer in the jungle than in the towns. No rascal out her, only last week when I went into the town, I had my pocket picked. Leopards do not pick pockets" (Bond: 1996: 88).

The story of a group of hunters shooting a trusted leopard moves readers' hearts in the story 'No room for Leopard'. Leopard skins were easily sold in Delhi at over a thousand rupees each. Of course, there was a ban issued on the export of its skins by the Government but there were always ways to do such illegal acts. Many corrupted, unscrupulous persons carry out trade. The leopard, like other members of the cat family, is nearing extinction in India which has always been home to different

plants and animal species.

Urbanization and deforestation in the hills and surrounding areas have forced many animals to be driven into the valleys inhabited by human beings. This exposes wild animals to heavy risks and fatal encounters. The hunters haven't been able to catch and kill the leopard. Only rapid deforestation, made it to get exposed to outer world. The leopard had a safe haven in the familiar surroundings of the forest. A boy wanders alone in the forest without any protection. He develops a mute understanding and companionship of the leopard. He likes its presence and loves how it crouches at the bank of the river. The wild animal seems to acknowledge his visit in a friendly way many times. Both become confident, amiable and friendly toward each other. The boy is afraid of the man who may come the other day with the gun and shoot at it. "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: 1988: 175).

This same distrust of an outsider or stranger is shared by the leopard and the boy. The boy feels ashamed at learning how faithless his own race was. The leopard trust the boy but tis scared of the possible distrust by other members of his race. The boy rethinks of how the wild animal reflects whether to trust other men. The leopard ends up trusting others too. "Did I leave him helpless by getting rid of both my fear and the leopard's protective fear?" (Bond 2008: 76).

The protagonist, the boy without being given name or age by the writer is the conveyor of how non-human species like floketails, langurs, red foxes all come in close contact with him. The fauna and flora quickly recognize his face as one of them because the boy didn't come to take anything from the jungle. They began to recognize his footsteps and grew fearless. After some days, his entry didn't disturb them. The birds would no longer fly away afraid. Birds would twitter with curiosity and continue to munch up tender green shoots of the oak. The birds also try to warn the boy of the danger of the leopard sitting on the rock by cries. The narrator(the boy) and the animal landscape of the jungle together strike a strong friendship.

Selfish motivation of mankind:

Ecological study of nature in this paper shows, the differences between how children and adults think and their relationship have also come to light. Kids love the natural world and cherish both the animate and inanimate in nature. It comes naturally to them. Their innocent minds are not influenced by any hidden motives of greed and selfishness which predominate the adult mind. They would never think of harming animals or using them for their own gain or profit.

However, contrasting the adults' motivations, Bond brings to light how adults deal relations like trade with money. They would not hesitate to kill a leopard if they could get a high price for its skin. Love, compassion, and trust mean nothing to them. Selfish attributes of man destroyed the beautiful landscape of the natural jungle with concrete jungles. The young boy cared for all the beings. He had no plans to hurt them. In return, they welcomed him, trusted him, and looked after him in their

own special ways. However, their acceptance of his presence—specifically, human presence—led to their downfall. The leopard became grew less cautious and more trusting towards humans. The shikaris were thought as friends by the leopard and it had to pay with its life.

Trust Vs Distrust-Bleak future:

The wild animals couldn't trust humans after that event. This mistrust of being neglected and killed for selfish means spread quickly. Sensitive human beings genuinely care for animals, since, not all people are cruel or selfish. Animals in the jungle became aware and cautious because of the action of the hunters. The young boy walks regularly alone through the forest and the small stream at the base of the hill joining early morning and evening. He doesn't explain why he goes there or loves it. It is left to the imagination of the audience. The readers should decide what would be the outcome. The trust that builds earlier between the boy and animals, along with the eventual betrayal is what turns out to be important. The message reaches us to maintain stable bonds between man and nature rather than being superficial.

Through the character of the boy, the story highlights environmental decay and the horrid future with feelings of anxiety and disappointment. In a lighter vein, this tale critiques modern society and modern lifestyles. Adults no longer act as examples of good behavior and thinking but as selfish and as benefactors in all ways and exploiters of flora and fauna of the jungle landscape.

'No Room for a Leopard' is a story that talks about deforestation and its consequences. It shows the unfortunate condition of unselfish animals after their habitats are destroyed. The story of a group of hunters who profit by selling leopard skins in Delhi after killing a trusting leopard is particularly heartbreaking and thought provoking. Many animals have been pushed into areas populated by humans in search of food because of deforestation, which is what happens in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* where tigers enter into human habitat. The main exposure is naturally, leopards look for safety in the hills and other places for food and security and never try to encroach so easily into human territory. Rapid deforestation is paralleled by the careless killing of leopards. The loss of natural shelter leads to the death of these animals and easy accessibility to kill them. They approach human homes because they no longer feel safe. Man has moved away from such concepts as love, compassion, kindness, etc. Human beings cheat their own kinsmen. The beautiful natural world suffers due to people's ruthless, selfish actions, which cause distress among other living beings.

The child narrator loved all the birds and animals of the forest world. They responded kindly by accepting, trusting, and caring for him in their unique ways. The leopard lost its life as it began to trust and became less wary of the hunters, viewing them as friends. This distrust soon became common for all animals. However, not all men are cruel, selfish, or untrustworthy. Yet, the actions of hunters keep them perpetually suspicious. Ruskin Bond addresses a crucial issue in a pluralistic manner showing the duality of the existence of good vs bad; trust vs distrust – contrasting dualities which exist

everywhere. In recent decades, we have become more aware of the negative impacts of deforestation and other environmental imbalances, as well as the destruction these changes will bring to our lives. This story promotes a contemporary view of humanity's connection with nature and the unity of all living things on Earth (Bond: 45).

Conclusion:

Bond's description has a functional value and denotes an important feature i.e., landscape. In this story, forest is carved out for scenic background, always appears in a prominent role. The jungle/forest serves as a natural habitat of animals and birds which are being driven away by the threat of hunters and poachers. Bond has reinforced the idea of natural balance by calling the endangered species as special and core of India's soul. Each big and small creature in nature is indispensable to keep the earth beautiful and healthy.

Bond has skillfully woven the message of save forest and landscape of the Himalayan region and indirectly save the endangering wildlife. These species embody qualities of nature, like purity, simplicity, and innocence. Landscape and nature teach life's finest attributes, abilities to find happiness and contentment in everyday events. Bond has a naturalist's love for animals, birds, and insects. His long association with landscape/mountains/animals etc., he has acquired a unique understanding of their habits. He is perhaps the only writer who has woven wild life, the environment and the Himalayan landscape so vividly and imaginatively into the texture of narration. Niranjana Mohanty makes an apt remark; "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 realizes that these animals and insects form a part and parcel of nature." (Mohanty: 1995: 51).

Thus, the paper covered how human and the non-human need to adapt to one another's mode and manner of existence. They survive against constant threat to their lives because they live in conformity with the laws of nature. It is thus essential to emphasize the fact that humans and the landscape are irrevocably interdependent on each other and the flora and fauna in natural forest and bioserves hold supreme recognition and act as anchors for maintenance of balance in the climate and ecosystem upholding human survival in the long run.

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