

Ecological Ethics and Environmental Consciousness in Bond's Selected Short Stories

Dr Khursheed Ahmad Qazi

Department of English, North Campus
University of Kashmir

Abstract

The term *ethics* means enquiry about ways of life and rules of conduct. In the past, philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Hobbes, Spinoza and many others would give general guidance to public regarding what to do, what to seek and how to behave with others. They would enlighten people with general crucial knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong on the basis of which one could take unwavering and unerring decisions. We must not forget that right from Plato to Russell, philosophers have always involved themselves by employing the philosophical techniques for the solution of practical problems. During the 21st Century, there has been unprecedented growth and development in Science, industry, management study, computronics, and cybernetics. One's thinking raises many questions and philosophical issues which are dominantly ethical. We can't ignore the fact that the modern technology has enabled us to earn material prosperity quite unequalled in the history of mankind at the cost of many precious things especially environment which has compelled even writers to talk of it in their writings. In fact, a particular school of criticism popularly known as Ecocriticism was born on the literary map of the world. It is a literary criticism from an environmentalist view point. Here, texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects. Beliefs and ideologies are assessed for their environmental implications.

This paper intends not only to talk of ecological ethics but also focus on eco-critical concerns in Ruskin Bond's selected short stories.

Key Words: Ethics, Environment, Ecocriticism, planet, negligence, Himalayas & beauty
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I think it happened naturally, you see, when I came to live in the hills in about 1964. Before that I was in Delhi, I was in London, so I had only sort of become closer to nature, nature had always played some sort of role, but it was only

when I came to live up here in the mountains that nature began to play a greater part in my stories and writing. To begin with, I wasn't environmentally conscious, in those days, I don't think the very word existed, so it was just it had the touches the way I felt and thought, and now

of course now there are so many people who are at least conscious of the environment, what's going wrong with it and what should be right with it. So if I helped in a small way, that fine. So I didn't really set out consciously to (promote environmentalism) though I would certainly emphasize the destruction of forests and diminution of wildlife.

Ruskin Bond

Ethics deals with values relating to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions. It is synonymous to and interchangeable with moral philosophy or principles. It may signify any one of the following:

- a.) A general pattern or way of life
- b.) A set of rules of conduct, and
- c.) Enquiry about ways of life and rules of conduct

Since, the main focus of the paper is environmental ethics which refers to the moral foundation of environmental responsibility seeking how far this responsibility extends. It talks of respect for life demanding an ethics concerning human welfare and good life. Here, I quote some lines from the U N World Chapter on Nature:

Life depends on the uninterrupted functioning of natural systems which ensure the supply of energy and nutrients. Civilization is rooted in nature, which has shaped human culture and influenced all artistic and scientific achievements.

The present day world is a world of advancements, hi-tech technology and unimaginable scientific growth and development. People live fast life which has turned them blind toward Nature and natural surroundings. This has evidently resulted in ecological crisis and the evident dangers which can prove fatal to life on the planet. In such a situation, I believe, the writers across the world have more responsibilities regarding developing ecological and environmental awareness among the common masses regarding the environmental limits and the consequences of human actions damaging the planet's basic life support system. This awareness will inspire us to contribute more to the environmental restoration not only as a hobby but also as a representative of Literature.

While writing this paper following questions struck my mind:

1. Should we concentrate heavily on environment for our existence depends on it?
2. Can ethics be connected to morality when we look at environment as a holistic category?

3. Which beliefs and ideologies are assessed in literary texts while tracing out eco-concerns in them?
4. Was Ruskin Bond really propagating the notion of environmental ethics or was he just giving a superficial notion of environment precisely due to his stay at Darjeeling from where he had penned most of his works?
5. How can we theorize Bond's Stories as the trope of environmental works of ethics?

Research reveals that environmentalism began to take shape in the second half of the 20th century, in response to perceptions of how dangerous environmental damage had become...The threats, today, that preoccupy environmentalists are not only to wildlife and wilderness but also to human health, food and shelter... (Waugh 2006:533).

Environmentalism is a critique of industrial modernity. We know that industrial pollution is the greatest threat to human existence in the current era. In the late 1980's, reports began to appear of concern among scientists about climate changes thought to be occurring because of increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere. Among the possible consequences are flooding, desertification, famine, eco-wars over diminishing resources, and millions of environmental refugees. Environmentalists are conventionally seen as defenders of nature. In *What is Nature?* (1995) Kate Soper writes of our need to retain two conflicting perspectives. We need to value natural ecosystems and acknowledge our dependence on them, without forgetting that 'nature' is a series of changing cultural constructions that can be used to praise and blame (Waugh 2006:538).

Bill Mckibben argues in *The End of Nature* (1990), that global warming has brought the possibility of this pure state of nature to an end: "By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence and that is fatal to its meaning ... (Mckibben 1990: 54).

Today, in literature eco-critics encourage creative writers to think seriously about the environmental issues and find out how language and literature can help them in transmitting values with profound ecological implications and thereby restore the pristine aesthetic beauty of the earth. The current ecological threat is the main focus of all especially the literatures. This seriousness for ecology has led to the emergence of the new school of eco-criticism which traces the relations between writers, texts and the world (ecosphere). It not only talks of the application of ecology and ecological principles to the study of literature but also theoretical approach to the interrelational web of natural, cultural and supernatural phenomena. Most ecological work shares a common motivation – the awareness that we have reached the age of environmental crisis or limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support system. This awareness creates in us a desire to contribute to environmental restoration

not only as a hobby but as a representative of literature. Eco-critics encourage others to think seriously about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications.

Ruskin Bond's dominant theme is ecology and environment. Natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie always constitute the setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. He forwards his worry for the unthoughtful cruel actions of man towards nature. Through his short stories for children, he presents a very significant message to everyone –the importance of nature in our life. He always emphasizes on the friendly relationship between man and nature as both are interdependent and interrelated. This is why he feels pity for the unsympathetic and cruel actions and attitude of modern humans towards nature. In fact, his empathy with nature and his animals comes through in this unique collection of stories and poems. His prose invariably emerges as nature friendly leaving a strong warmth, love and security in the hearts of the readers. He forges an intimate relationship with the Himalayas. He preaches through his works the significance of landscape and peculiar ethos through carefully mastered words. His stories breath a deep love for nature and people. He presents highly mesmerizing descriptions about the flora and fauna of the Himalayas. Many of the Bond's stories are set in Landour Cantonment in the upper reaches of Mussoorie. His works will forever preserve the tranquility, beauty and serenity of the Garhwal Himalayas. As a child, he spent long childhood days in Mussoorie imbibing a love for nature from his grandfather. The natural scenic heights and hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie almost constitute the real setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. The highly deteriorating condition of the region was not a welcome change for such a nature lover who couldn't stop to talk of it in his writings especially stories. Recently, though heavy emphasis was laid on saving the trees yet the actual progress has been very insignificant and negligible. Even today, the trees are destroyed and cut down ruthlessly sans replacement and thought for a better future. Overgrazing and ruthless assault on herbs causes damage to the meadows and pastures. The absence of forests will finally lead to less precipitation in the form of rain and snow leaving the grand beautiful awe inspiring peaks without their white mantle. Thus, dryness will harm the essence of humans.

He has written over three hundred short stories. Though he brings a vivid picture of the Himalaya yet he deals with different aspects of this region – from natural beauty to recent environmental degradation. I have selected following three short stories here for the eco-critical analysis in this paper: *No Room for a Leopard*, *An Island of Trees* and *Dust on the Mountain*. *No room for a Leopard* is about deforestation and its accompanying aftermath. It presents the pathetic condition of the animals after deforestation. It is a very moving account of the killing of a trusting leopard by a group of shikaris who sell the skins of leopards in Delhi and earn money. Deforestation becomes the main cause of the leopard's searching for refuge in the hills and surrounding areas, many animals have been driven under duress for food into the valleys inhabited by human beings. Even the killing of leopards indiscriminately can be added to rapid

deforestation. Loosing natural shelter would mean putting animal to death. They fail to feel secure and move toward human dwellings. Pertinently, deforestation brings humans and non-humans closer to each other. We came into close contact with the folktales, kaleej, pheasants, langurs, red foxes and even a sinewy orange-gold leopard. As he had not come to take anything from the jungle, the birds and animals soon grew accustomed to his face. They began to recognize his footsteps. After sometime, his approach did not threaten and disturb them. The birds would no longer fly away; they would remain perched on a boulder in the middle of the stream while he got across by means of other boulders only a few yards away; the langurs in the oak and rhododendron trees would just watch him with some curiosity and continue to munch up the tender green shoots of the oak. In addition to this all, when one day they saw a leopard poised on a rock twenty feet above the young narrator, they tried to warn him of the hidden danger by grunting and chattering. Hence, they showed their concern for him. A deep bond got established between the narrator and the animal world without their ever exchanging a single word.

The two human states – the children's thoughts and the adult's reactions – have been talked about. Children love nature – birds and animals. This comes naturally to them. No ulterior consideration enters their innocent minds. They never harm the animals or exploit them for their personal self, gain or profit. Only the adults are driven by monetary considerations. If a leopard's skin fetches them good price, they would kill it. Compassion, kindness, pity, trust, and love mean nothing to them. This cruel selfish attitude of humans shatters the idyllic natural world causing worry and chaos for other creatures on the earth.

The young narrator loved each and every bird and animal on the planet. They, in turn, equally reciprocated by accepting him, trusting him and caring for him, in their own respective way. The leopard started trusting by becoming less cautious and taking the shikaris also as friends only to lose his life. Soon, this distrust spread far and wide. All men are not dishonest, selfish and cruel; most of us deeply love animals and care for them but the act of shikaris makes them suspicious forever.

Ruskin Bond touches on a very burning issue in a very light manner. In the last few decades, we have become seriously aware of the evils of deforestation and other environmental imbalances, and the havoc these changes are to play in our lives. This story forwards a contemporary relevant theme that concerns us all. In *An Island of Trees*, the grandmother reveals to her granddaughter, Koki, the deep bond that grows between humans and nonhumans if only there is love and compassion. He shares a dialogue between Koki and her grandmother. The grandmother discusses her father and his great love for trees and flowers. She informs Koki that she was convinced that plants and trees loved her father with as much tenderness as he loved them. She reminds herself of how sometimes when she sat alone under a tree she would feel a little lonely or lost. But the moment her father joined her, the garden became a happy place, the tree itself more friendlier. Koki's great-grandfather had blind passion for planting trees. He would walk

into the scrubland and beyond the river bed even during the monsoons for planting the saplings with a hope to create a future forest. He told his daughter that he plants for the earth, for food and shelter and for the birds and animals that live on it. He also informed her that plants prevent the banks of rivers from being washed away. But unfortunately everywhere people are cutting down and destroying trees indiscriminately sans planting fresh ones. The thought of a world without trees is simply impossible and nightmarish. This is the main message that Koki's grandmother puts forward for us all.

Towards the conclusion, Grandmother voices an experience discussing the deep bond and intimacy that grows between humans and non-humans if only there is love and compassion. After a gap of twenty years or more, she returned to her parental house and one day walked over to the island where her father would once plant all kinds of trees. Though the animals considered her as stranger yet the trees

seemed to know her and beckoned her nearer. She ran her hands over the barks of the trees and felt like touching the hands of old dear friends. She saw that many small trees and wild plants and grasses had sprung up under the protection of those whom she and her father had planted years back. Since then the trees had multiplied and the forest was being formed and this way her father's dream came true.

The emphasis of this story is not on other creatures like in *No Room for Leopard* but only on the importance of trees on the earth. Indirectly, he focuses on the balanced ecology and proper environmental ethics. Ruskin himself lives in the foothills of the Himalayas since his childhood which enabled him to be an advocate of love toward nature. He would feel pained on seeing the damages done by humans to the surroundings and nature. In most of his stories, there are open references of such irresponsible acts and behaviour of human beings. He had similar love for other creatures dwelling in nature also. One could easily comprehend his sympathetic response and love towards animals in his stories. Being a true lover of nature natural surrounding and other creatures, he could feel deeply hurt for the creatures who are being shot for pleasure and other monetary gains.

Dust on the Mountain focuses on Bisnu, a boy, whose search for job enabled him to learn the importance of trees. That year the winter was dry sans snowfall. Bisnu's mother could not recollect when the last time weather was like that. We have already discussed above that deforestation affects precipitation and if it continues the Himalayan peaks would appear ugly without their white mantle. This affects badly the monsoon rain also and Bisnu's place is shown as such to receive no rainfall. This is again the outcome of ruthless deforestation.

Other than deforestation, trees have perished and are perishing due to our carelessness, too. The campers make a fire and forget to extinguish it which sometimes becomes the cause of huge fire.

This way, thousands of Himalayan trees perished in the flames. Oaks, deodars, maples, pine trees that had taken centuries to grow get now ruthlessly damaged and destroyed in the fire. There was no one to extinguish it. It takes days to die down by itself. Due to this carelessness on people's part, many valuable trees are lost. Though such incidents are common on the Himalayas yet people have not learnt the lesson and fail to do their duty without realizing that it is they who are going to be affected of such acts.

Dryness caused tremendous decrease in production of food and fruits. Hence, Bisnu went to town to earn. After working at a tea stall, Bisnu and his friend Chittru went to a quarry to find work. Chittru had already been there unfortunately when the place was full of wild strawberries for which he used to come, but now except a few skeletons of trees everything else had gone. As they approached the quarries, a blast shook the hillside which explains the disappearance of the trees. Here, Ruskin Bond emerges as an environmentalist explaining the importance of trees – an important characteristic of his stories dealing with environmental concern. One day when Pritam, the truck driver, had met with an accident on the mountain road, it was a tree which had saved him from death. After this incident both – Pritam and Bisnu – realized, "It's better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it". After the incident, returning home to work on their land for they understood the significance of growing trees and safeguarding not only their own essence but also posterity.

On the whole, Ruskin's stories breathe his great love and sincere concern for nature which takes care of us like our mothers. Hence, we need to prove sincere, selfless, honest and loyal toward it by inculcating in us a true sense of environmental ethics and ecology which have been literary speaking the main gist or focus of any eco-critical study.

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