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An Ecocritical Perspective of Ruskin Bond's "My Father's Trees in Dehra" and "The Leopard"

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Abstract

The term 'Ecocriticism', which first arose as a concept in the late 1970s, is coined by William Rueckert in his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978) but it gets its massive popularity only in the hand of Cheryll Glotfelty, an American ecocritic, in the late 1980s. The literary ecocritics like William Rueckert and Cheryll Glotfelty meticulously examine the relationship between literature and environment in their theories in order to appraise how literary texts treat the subject of nature. In this context, an exact delineation of such issue in Ruskin Bond's two well-known short stories, "My Father's Tree in Dehra" and "The Leopard" could be done where nature or environment remains an imperative stuff of discussion. The paper also inspects how Bond has exercised the Wordsworthian sense of belief on nature in these short stories. The paper not only reveals the beauty of nature but also explores why its downfall transpires and it's not the scientist or conservationist who can give the best protection to birds, animals, and trees living around us rather it is 'common man' who can give the best protection to them in the long run, only by maintaining the natural poise.

Keywords: conservationist; ecocriticism; ecocritics; environment; literature; nature

Nature has influenced human life and other living beings since the time of its inception throughout the history of human civilization by endowing with food and oxygen mainly. Besides these two and other natural things, we also find solace in the lap of nature which reduces our stress as well as elevates our inner function properly regardless of one's age and culture. But nature sometimes proves to be very harmful and stronger than men as it causes different natural calamities like Tsunami, drought, flood, earthquake, untimely rain and scorching heat etc. In this



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regard, the following questions can be raised: Why does it happen? Who is responsible for it? In nutshell, we can say that such calamities result mostly due to man's detrimental activities such as unremitting deforestation, augmentation in the field of industry, and high use of automobiles etc. Therefore, we have no choice but to accept — *nature's reward* and *adversity* — on the earth.

Men and nature which are an inter-reliant phenomenon is extensively explored by the late 20th century literary ecocritics in their theories. They meticulously examine the relationship between literature and the environment in their theories in order to appraise how literary texts treat the subject of nature. The term 'Ecocriticism', first arose as a concept in the late 1970s, was coined by William Rueckert in his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978), but it got its massive popularity only in the hand of an American writer, Cheryll Glotfelty in the late 1980s. Glotfelty has given a very compressed definition of 'ecocriticism' in his famous book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, where he said that, "...Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Later, the term was dealt with and explored by other members of the *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment* (ASLE) under the banner of a journal named *Interdisciplinary Studies in literature and Environment* (ISLE), which was actually established by Patrick Murphy in 1993. The ASLE's main aim was:

To promote the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world' and to encourage 'new nature writing traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature, and interdisciplinary environmental research (quoted in Glotfelty and Fromm xviii).

Not only in the 20th literary theories but also in the British Romantic poetry, especially in Wordsworth's poetry, nature remained an imperative stuff of discussion which was later followed by the younger romantic poets like John Keats and P. B. Shelley. Besides these overseas theorists and romantic poets, we can also hit upon an exact delineation of such similar issue in the writings of certain Indian romantic writers: Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, A. K. Ramanuja, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh etc. They have explained the beauty of nature and its downfall widely and explicitly in their writings.

In this context, we can reminisce the contribution of Ruskin Bond who is called the Wordsworth of India falls under the category of 'nature writers' or 'environmental writers.' Bond who has Wordsworthian sense of belief in nature has accurately depicted such views in his short stories, "Birds Life in the City", "The Leopard" and "My Father's Tree in Dehra" which are the parts of his collected anthology *Delhi Is Not Far: The Best of Ruskin Bond*. Bond who has explored *the beauty of nature* and *the destruction of nature* unequivocally in these short stories has an enormous effect on the ecological study. He has good romantic sense for nature which is revealed in his writings cannot be denied. He has vividly depicted the environmental



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issues through the natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie as he has seen and experienced them from very close.

In his short story “My Father’s Trees in Dehra”, Bond has talked about his absorption for a small rocky Island which was fully covered by different beautiful plants situated in the middle of a dry river-bed in Mussoorie. The dry river-bed “...was one of those river-beds, so common in the foot-hills, which [were] completely dry in the summer but flooded during the monsoon rains” (Bond 45). Due to such off-putting seasonal effect, the grass remained short in size and brown in colour, while Sal trees appeared emaciated in shape particularly in summer season. The grass, despite such insalubrious appearance, was being grazed by the skinny cattle at the edge of the jungle.

Ruskin Bond who used to visit the island regularly with his father in his childhood had assisted him with great enthusiasm in his tree-planting like tamarinds, laburnum, and coral-saplings plantations etc. They “spent the day planting them on the island, then ate [their] lunch there, in the shelter of a wild plum” (Bond 44). His main aim behind such activity was to maintain the ‘weighing scale’ of nature.

After long time when he returned back again to visit the island, he saw the same infavourable seasonal changes which created a kind of qualm in his mind regarding the survival of trees planted by him and his father in his childhood. He asked himself, “Could our trees have survived? Will our island be there, or has some flash-flood during a heavy monsoon washed it away completely?” (Bond 44). In spite of such dry river-bed in summer and excessive flood during monsoon, Bond was very buoyant regarding the growth and survival of the planted plants in the island. As he looked across dry river-course, his eyes are caught by the spectacular red plumes of the coral blossom in the island, where he also noticed a number of parrots which had come to live in them. The beautiful planted trees had multiplied in numbers and grown up beyond their limits over the years. When he was thoroughly looking at the planted trees and its scenery, he observed that different wild plants and grasses have also sprung up under the protection of these planted trees. In this small forgotten corner of the world (island), he observed how his father’s dreams were becoming true through the growing of the plants in its full length. Bond who has immense poetic sense imagined that the trees were whispering among themselves and beckoning him near. So, it seemed that the trees knew him. In this way, Bond garishly explores the “...ecological theory, environmentalism, conceptions of nature and their depictions, the human/nature dichotomy and related concerns” (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii) in his short story “My Father’s Trees in India”.

Besides all these, Bond also found a plateau with pine trees during his visit to the island: “The ruins of what must have been the houses of the first settlers—just a few piles of rubble, now overgrown with weeds, sorrel, dandelions, and nettles” (Bond 51). He was utterly “...struck by the silence [and roofless ruins] that surrounded [him], the absence of birds and animals, the sense of complete desolation” (Bond 51).



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We have come in contact of another beautiful description of nature when Ruskin Bond was talking about a so deep, not a narrow, 'ravine'. Due to its profundity, the ravine remained in shadow for the most of the day. "This encouraged many birds and animals to emerge from cover during daylight hours....As a result, the ravine had become a little haven of wildlife, one of the few natural sanctuaries left near Mussoorie, a hill-station in northern India" (Bond 46). Near the ravine, "A narrow path twisted its way down through the trees, over an open ridge where red sorrel grew wild, and then steeply down through a tangle of wild raspberries, creeping vines and slender bamboo" (Bond 46). Not only in the ravine but also below Bond's own cottage, we could find a forest of oak, maple, and Himalayan rhododendron. However, "the stream [of ravine] ran close by the verge, tumbling over smooth pebbles, over rocks worn yellow with age, on its way to plains and to the little Song River and finally to the sacred Ganges" (Bond 46). When Bond saw the stream first, it was fully covered by wild roses with small white blossoms lying in clusters. Bond had been visiting these beautiful flowers, plants, and the stream regularly only after finishing his writings.

The hill areas of Mussoorie remained fully dry and brown in the month of May and June, as stated by Bond in his short story "My Father's Trees in Dehra", but it always remained cool and green near the stream. Furthermore, "At the bottom of the hill, the path led on to a grassy verge, surrounded by wild dog roses. (It is surprising how closely the flora of the lower Himalayas, between 5000 to 8000 feet, resembles that of the English countryside)" (Bond 46). Due to the stream, the ferns and maidenhair and long grasses were also thriving in this region. He also found small pool and cave in the downstream where water was dripping from the roof of the cave. The dropping water was spangled with gold and silver colour in the shafts of sunlight. Therefore, Bond usually loved to return to these hill areas from city life in order to renew himself both physically and mentally. If one visits or lives in beautiful mountain areas covered by natural scenery for long period of time, it is hardly possible for oneself to unfasten from it as he/she must wish to return back to the visited place again and again. So, Bond was not an exceptional one because he has an enthrallment for the scenes of the hill and its raven like William Wordsworth. So, in this context we can recollect few lines from Wordsworth's illustrious poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey", where he said:

That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

Besides hill, raven and its stream, Bond has also seen the pine marten, red fox, and bears several times during his evening walk in the forest. In this region, he has enjoyed the gliding down of the birds on open, motionless wings. The main aim behind such visit was not only to enjoy the beauty of nature but also to create a kind of barrier by disturbing the birds and animals in order



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to save them from the parties of the peasant hunters. Except this *raison d'être*, he had never wished to disturb them and interfered in their commerce.

According to Pater Barry, deforestation is generally used in the 'green studies' or 'eco-criticism' which warns us of environmental threats emanating from industrial, commercial, and neo-colonial forces. Robert Pogue Harrison has explicitly demonstrated the effect of deforestation on us in his remarkable book *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization of Natural Resources*,

The destructive impulse with respect to nature all too often has psychological causes that go beyond the greed for the material resource or the need to domesticate an environment. There is too often a deliberate rage and vengefulness at work in the assault on nature and its species, as if one would project onto the natural world the intolerable anxieties of finitude which hold humanity hostage to death. (Harrison 18)

Like Harrison, Ruskin Bond has also truly depicted humans' cruelty towards nature in his short story "The Leopard". According to Bond, "...the purely wild birds, those who depend upon the forests for life, are rapidly disappearing, simply because the forests are disappearing" (Bond 176). Bond has spent certain stage of his life in New Delhi, where he has seen more birds in one week than during a month in the hills of Mussoorie. Summarily, we can say that the number of forest-birds is decreasing day by day mainly due to our cutting of trees.

From the ancient times, the forests are being chopped down in maximum numbers in order to create an urbanized modern world. "...If people keep cutting trees, instead of planting them, there'll soon be no forests left at all, and the world will be just one vast desert" (Bond 43), while "the prospect of a world without trees [will become] a sort of nightmare for [us]" (Bond 44). Bond metaphorically says that "There was a time when [the trees] could walk about like people, but someone cast a spell on them and rooted them to one place" (Bond 44). However, men can cut the trees but it's not possible for them to stop their growth as "they're always trying to move—see how they reach out with their arms!" (Bond 44).

In "My Father's Trees in Dehra", Bond has explored the beauty of nature, but in "The Leopard", he has shown how its beauty is being diminished by us. In "The Leopard", Bond has explored the issue of deforestation in general and its detrimental effect on animals like Leopard in particular. Due to deforestation, animals like tigers, leopards, birds, and langurs, as mentioned by him, are ebbing in numbers from the world. For deforestation, they are decreasing in numbers and are unable to find their inhabitants as they are running from here to there for their shelters. The leopard which is in a state of extinction in India due to such reason is a surprise to find so close in Mussoorie. Bond who has speculated the extinction of animals like leopard from the forests of the world has warned about its future effect on us because the leopards play an important role in the maintenance of nature's balance.

On one occasion, the animals and birds suddenly became very cautious in Bond's approach in a forest because they cannot trust any human beings. "The red fox did not show



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itself; and the pine martens, who had become quite bold, now dashed into hiding, at [Bond's] approach" (Bond 50), but at that very moment, the birds and animals showed their faith on him due to his love for them as "...the birds and animals soon grew accustomed to [his] presence, or possible they recognized [his] footstep. After some time, [his] approach did not disturb them" (Bond 47). "The langurs in the oak and rhododendron trees, who would at first go leaping through the branches at [his] approach, now watched [him] with some curiosity as they munched the tender green shoots of the oak" (Bond 47). "The young ones scuffled and wrestled like boys, while their parents groomed each other's coats, stretching themselves out on the sunlit hillside" (Bond 47).

Bond has also experienced the cry of the barking deer nearly every morning due to hunters' chase of them in a forest. Due to deforestation and hunters' chase, the leopard and deer all were in a frightening state as they were hiding themselves in the surrounding green valleys of the hills of Mussoorie. He had "...heard the quickening cry of barking deer as it fled through the forest. The hunt was still on" (Bond 47). Bond had tried his best to save these animals from the peasants' hunting by clapping his hands during his visit to the jungles. When he used to clap, "...the leopard sprang away into the thickets, making absolutely no sound as it melted into the shadows" (Bond 47).

Once, a party of curious and intensified hunters who were resting beneath the oak trees asked him about the location of a leopard which he saw so many times during his visit to the hills, but Bond didn't reveal its location because he was in favour of the protection of the leopard. "The hunters had seen the carcass of the deer, and they had seen the leopard's pug-marks, and they kept coming to the forest. Almost every evening [he] heard their guns banging away; for they were ready to fire almost anything" (Bond 50). In reality, the hunters were the exporters of the skins of such animals—

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. (Bond 49)

Due to such brutal nature of human beings, Bond had made the leopard "confident— too confident, too careless, too trusting of the human in his midst" (Bond 51). Bond asked— "...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?" (Bond 51). Like the hunters, Bond didn't wish to make any kind of physical contact to the leopard rather he wanted to enjoy the springing of it from one rock to another rock. What he really wanted was the leopard's trust which he thought the leopard has given to him.

At the end of the short story, "The Leopard", we come to know that Bond has failed to protect the leopard, though he had saved it so many times earlier. Later, he saw the shouting and beating drums by the hunters who were "carrying a long bamboo pole across their shoulders; and



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slung from the pole, feet up, head down, was the lifeless body of the leopard, shoot in the neck and in the head” (Bond 51-52). The portrait of the killed leopard made him gloomy as he left the forest with pensive mood, while the absence of the leopard made the forest a silent one. “It was very silent almost as though the birds and animals knew that their trust had been violated” (Bond 52). We can compare the importance of the leopard through another killing of a tiger and its celebration made by villagers in another short story collection *Panther’s Moon and Other Story*:

At first, villagers were glad because they felt their buffaloes were safe. Then the men began to feel that something had gone out of their lives, out of the life of the forest; they began to feel that forest was no longer a forest. It had been shrinking year by year, but, as long as the tiger had been there and the villagers had heard it roar at night, they had known that they were still secure from the intruders and newcomers who came to fell the trees and eat up the land and let the flood waters into the village. But, now that the tiger had gone, it was as though a protector had gone, leaving the forest open and vulnerable, easily destroyable. And, once the forest was destroyed, they too would be in danger.... (Bond 127)

The paper mainly talks about men’s disparaging activity like incessant deforestation, one of the leading causes of global warming or climate change, is making the earth too hot for all living beings. Besides it, the paper also warns us about its unstoppable future repercussion. If we still destroy the nature and its beauty, we will too be in very danger like the birds and animals. So, we need to go for reforestation in order to mitigate the pollution from air as well as to medicate the poisoning human life. Hence, the government and we as human beings have to take prime initiative in tree plantation program with great enthusiasm if we don’t want to live on a treeless moon and polluted environment. Conclusively, we can say that it’s not the scientist or conservationist or government who can give the best protection to birds, animals, and trees living around us rather it is ‘common man’ who can give the best protection to them in the long run.



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