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Ruskin Bond's

The Cherry Tree: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract: The Environmental concern in literature is a much-talked matter of the day with the arrival of a young theory called Ecocriticism. The green movement promotes environmental concern among the readers. Deep Ecology, one of the sub-fields of ecocriticism, highlights the significance of every organism in an environment. The article explores a child's understanding of the ecological significance of the commonest objects of nature in an environment. Ruskin Bond is a famous Indian writer in English known for his nature writings. Being a worshipper of nature, Bond's short fiction *The Cherry Tree* faithfully depicts environmental awareness grows in a child during his close contact with nature. The paper is an attempt to study this beautiful story under the surveillance of green lens.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, child, planted, cherry tree, eco-consciousness.

1. Introduction

Representation of nature in literature is not a recent phenomenon. Since time immemorial great classics of literature have treatment of nature. From *Beowulf* to *The Wasteland* nature plays an important role in literature. But the writer's attitude to nature is not always the same. Sometimes nature appears as a background and sometimes as a character. The metaphysical poets look upon nature as a concept through which mankind conceives of its difference from the non-human world. The romantics took shelter in the open lap of nature being dissatisfied with the surrounding world. Nature plays a fateful role in Victorian writers like Hardy as we find in his novels. The modern



writers had a pragmatic attitude to nature. But nature writing took a paradigm shift towards the end of the twentieth century when the environmental issues got a place in literature in view of the global environmental crisis. The ecocritics are taking a leading role and ecoconsciousness is now winning over egoconsciousness in literature. The need of the hour is to build up ecocentric attitude which might save our earth from environmental disorder. The present article highlights on the ecocentric attitude of child which is developed with his interaction with nature. Ruskin Bond a champion writer of children's literature enlightens us in his simple story *The Cherry Tree* with environmental concern, hence the study.

2. Aim of Ecocriticism Movement

Ecocriticism is considered to be one of the youngest revisionist movements of recent times. It has been running less than three decades yet gaining its rapid growth and popularity. The word 'ecocriticism' was first used by William Rueckert in his critical essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). However the root of the emergent movement traces back to the past even in the days of Vedas and Upanishads as guessed by a fundamental ecocritic. William Howarth etymologically deconstructs the term as derived from the Greek word *oikas* (meaning household in English) and *kritis* (meaning judge in English). *Oikos* is our largest habitat or earth and *kritos* is the arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order. In view of the present environmental scenario the ecocritics wants the earth to be kept in good order for mankind in general. The movement gets its momentum with publication of two seminal works one by Lawrence Buell named *Environmental Imagination* and the other by Cheryll Glotfelty named *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996. The most comprehensive definition of ecocriticism is made by Glotfelty who in her book defines it as "the study of the relationship between the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). According to Scott Slovic there is no single dominant worldview defining ecocritical practice as it is being defined and redefined everyday by actual practice of thousands of literary scholars round the globe to find out a solution to the contemporary environmental crisis through literary studies. Ecocriticism thus proliferates into



several sub-fields life apocalypse, ecosophy, deep ecology, ecocide, ecofeminism, anthropocene etc. Yet despite the apparent contradiction among the ecocritics, all converges to a single point that our global environmental crisis is not natural but because of human atrocities against nature. Greg Garrard talks about the need for ecocritics to develop this kind awareness among the readers. Ecology is a branch of science that develops 'ecology' literacy among the readers while ecocriticism develops 'ecological' literacy among the readers.

3. Ruskin Bond as a Nature Writer

Born in India in 1934, Ruskin Bond is a writer of British descent. He lives in India and is regarded as one of the prolific writers of Indian writing English. Bond spent his early life in Shimla and later started living in Dehradun and Mussoorie. So he has a practical experience of leading a life in close proximity with natural surroundings of Himalayan foothills. This finds best expression in his writings. Nature permeates his entire writing with a major role influencing his characters. As a freelance writer, he started writing short stories and poems for newspapers and magazines. Bond had written *The Room on the Roof* and its sequel *Vagrants in the Valley* published by Penguin India in 1993. Besides he has written over 500 short stories, essays and novels including *The Blue Umbrella*, *Funny Side Up*, *A Flight of Pigeons* and some 50 other books for children. Because of his contribution to Children's Literature, The Indian Council for Child Education has recognised his role in the growth of children's literature in India. His famous fictional character Rusty an Anglo Indian orphan of sixteen is based on the autobiography of life. The great Indian writer was conferred Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992 for *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*. He was also awarded Padma Shri in 1999 and Padma Bibhushan in 2014. For his valuable contribution to Indian Writing in English, he got Lifetime Achievement Award in 2017. Value education of man begins from childhood. Bond's works inculcate human nature interconnection through children's literature that develops ecological values among the children during the formative period of their life.



4. *The Cherry Tree* as an Ecocritical Text

The Cherry Tree is an eye opener for the children who after reading it get imbued with ecological awareness. The short fiction begins like this. Rakesh a very small school boy of six years old was returning home from Mussoorie bazaar. He bought a bunch of cherries and relished it on the way. The sweet juicy fruits were eaten up one by one and it reduced to only three cherries when he reached his grandpa's house where he stayed with him. His grandfather was a retired forest ranger and so he had great knowledge for the Himalayan landscape and its vegetation. The Himalayan foothills where they lived had not many trees as the dry cold wind and the stony soil stunted the growth of most plants. But Rakesh observed that the forest of oak and deodar developed in the more sheltered slopes. So far Rakesh had thrown away all the seeds until he put the last one on his palm and studied it. As per his grandpa's suggestion, he wanted to make the best use of it. Inspired, he took a spade, dug the soil and planted it in the shady corner of a mustard field and forgot all about it.

Meanwhile, Rakesh eco-consciousness grew with his observation of the natural surroundings. He liked to listen to stories told by his grandfather who in turn requested Rakesh to read out newspaper because of his feeble eyesight. But Rakesh had little interest in socio-centric issues. The child was gradually getting a bio-centric attitude. At the advent of winter, he observed how the deodar trees looked bare because of the dry cold wind and snowfall. He used to enjoy the charcoal fire in the evening to have some warmth during the biting cold of winter. He saw how the migratory birds arrived at their land from far off Siberia and how they returned to their land during the spring with a 'v' shaped formation streaming northwards and heard the call of the birds through the mountain air.

One morning when Rakesh went into the garden and stooped to pick up a small twig, he found to his surprise that it was well rooted. He stared at it for some time and was delighted to confirm with his grandpa that it was the same seed that he had planted and that now sprouted into a cherry plant. Rakesh nourished it with water regularly and spotted it with pebbles. He witnessed the



gradual growth of the plant in a slow but steady way. With the arrival of rainy season, when the ferns sprang from the trunks of the trees, strange looking lilies came up in the long grass and the cherry tree grew up rapidly.

But the growth of the plant was not without hindrance. Once a goat entered the garden and ate all its leaves when it was two feet height. Only the main stem and the two thin branches remained. Rakesh thought the plant must die now but grandfather assured him that the cherry tree being stoic in nature would survive again. Towards the end of the rainy season new leaves appeared on the branches. Again a woman cut the tree into two while cutting grass for domestic animals. Grandfather even scolded her for doing the damage which was irreparable. "But the cherry tree had no intention of dying. By the time summer came round again, it had sent out several new shoots with tender green leaves." (Bath & Dasgupta 33) As Rakesh grew eight years old, the cherry tree grew taller too. It was now up to his chest. Rakesh still nourished the plant with great care. But danger did not leave the cherry tree and Rakesh was an eyewitness of its struggle for existence. The cherry tree's first visitor was a hairy caterpillar who started making a meal of the leaves of the cherry tree. Rakesh removed it quickly and asked it to come back only when it would turn into a butterfly. Because he knew that by then it would be able to suck honey from the flowers and help in infusion. By the time it began winter again there appeared pink blossom at the end of the branch of cherry tree. The following year the tree grew matured and more blossoms in the twigs appeared. The honey bee thronged to feed on the nectar in the blossoms. The tiny birds gathered at the flowers and tore away the petals. Yet there were more blossoms than the number of birds during the spring. When the summer came the small cherries covered the branches of the tree. These invited the bigger birds like bulbuls and scarlet minivets and they started feasting gleefully on the cherries. Grandfather enjoyed the lovely sight of the cherry tree sitting on a cane chair under it. The cool shade of the tree also amused him. Rakesh too enjoyed a thrill especially when the pretty leaves of the cherry tree danced in breeze. He had a special feeling for it as he himself had planted it. He was happy as he had not wasted the seed which had transformed into a beautiful tree. He felt the joy of creation as he touched the smooth bark of the tree and ran his hand along the trunk and put his



finger to the tip of a leaf. He said to himself, “Is this what it feels to be God?” (Bath & Dasgupta 35). That cherry seed was really a lucky one for him as it was put to use.

5. Conclusion

The Study shows how a little child gets awareness of environment while dealing with the simple things of nature. The schoolboy Rakesh understands how a single seed sprouts up into a plant and then into a tree invoking a symbiotic relationship between the human and the nonhuman world. The Cherry tree is the centre which attracts birds, insects, man, child etc. Only a little care can transform the trifle seed into a tree and then into many seeds through flowers and fruits. The child had a practical experience of trees, birds, insects, flowers, and seasons etc. which build up his ecological vision. His first aim was to relish the cheery to gratify his sense of taste but soon it transformed into nature care for long term benefit of mankind. The text is not merely a glorification of nature but an exploration of the inherent worth of nature. In today’s circumstances, people indulge in environmental exploitation. They have little time to witness the inherent value of natural objects. A child like Rakesh had such kind of ecological understanding which everyone should have for better earth care.

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