

An Ecocritical Study of the Selected Verses of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is said to be “literary and cultural criticism from an environmental viewpoint.” by Richard Kerridge. It takes into consideration the treatment of non-humans in any literary text to analyze how far any text is ecocentric. Ruskin Bond is an Anglo Indian author. He is generally known for his novels but he says poetry to be his first love in the introduction to *Ruskin Bond's Book of Verses*. This book is divided into several sections according to the main theme of the verses intentionally by the poet himself to make it more helpful to the readers as he points out in the ‘Introduction’ to this book. Though the verses are arranged so, almost in every section, nature stands out as a common concern and phenomenon. This is why, in this paper, the verses are selected from different sections to understand how ecocritical perspective links all the sections though their main themes are different. The verses taken here are, ‘Lone Fox Dancing’, ‘Firefly in My Room’, ‘The Owl’ from the section titled as ‘Nature’, ‘Song of the Cockroach’ from the section ‘Humour’ and ‘The Pool’ from ‘Childhood’. These verses are analyzed here with the theory of ecocriticism.

Key Words: Deep Ecology, Ecocriticism, Idylls, Nature, Specicism,

Introduction:

Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism* mentions the definition of it given by Glotfelty who defines Ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” (Garrard 3) According to him, “ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (Garrard 3). He also points out the idea of Ecocriticism as given by Richard Kerridge according to whom, “ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis.” (Garrard 4) Such a study of any literary works includes not only the thematic concerns, that may misguide the readers to consider it as a work with ecocritical concerns due to nature as a central theme in it while the concern of the writer might present the human centric approach, but also the meanings derived from the text which needs to be analyzed having the concerns of ecocriticism in mind. While Ruskin Bond is mainly known for his novels, this paper tries to analyze his verses with the ecocritical insights. In his *Introduction to Ruskin Bond's Book of Verses* the poet mentions about his love for writing poems and also prefers to call them verses as he had never intended to be a serious poet. Having this in mind, the compositions taken here for the analyses are called verses instead of calling

them poems. These verses present the harmonious coexistence of the humans and non-humans on the Earth and the poet takes day to day situations and an occasional encounter with the wild nature which exemplifies his ecocritical concerns when analyzed with the ideas of Satish Kumar, Heidegger, George Sessions, Mary Midgley, Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard. The verses selected here can be analyzed as follow.

Ecocritical Study of the Selected Verses:

The verses of Ruskin Bond are written in a simple language with the descriptions of nature and other non-humans in it in such a way that suggests harmony between man and nature as well as human responsibility to take care of nature which shows, “human accountability to the environment which is part of the text’s ethical orientation” (Garrard 53) which Lawrence Buell sees as a measure to understand how far a text is ecocentric. Majority of the poems in this collection have natural world as a setting and creatures found in the nature as the subjects in it. The poem titled as, ‘Lone Fox Dancing’ shows poet’s coming across a fox in the forest. The setting of the poem is forest and at night the poet is passing through it when he sees a fox dancing. The poet’s reaction to this situation and the words chosen to depict it show the poet’s concern with nature in its original state and his desire to let it be as it is. The poet decides to change his way in order not to disturb the fox while acknowledging that “The night was his by right” (Bond 25) This indicates that for the poet, “the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest” (Garrard 53) The poet could acknowledge the right of nonhumans and could let them be on their land instead of modern tendency of encroaching upon the forest land. The use of the words is also remarkable to depict poet’s own way of looking at the world around him. When it is night that the right is that of a fox, the poet mentions the time of his own joyful mood as that of morning. The poet does not encroach upon even the natural time zone of the animals. It should also be noted that the time is also mentioned as it exists naturally, i.e. morning, night and not as it exists in the manmade conditions i.e. clock time.

When it is a common tendency in literary works to ascribe human characteristics in the animals, the poet compares himself to the fox. In the moment of his happiness as he says, he is like “lone fox dancing” (Bond 25) It is remarkable that in many of the verses by Ruskin Bond, the boundary between human and non-human is erased by letting them co-exist harmoniously. Figuring out the similar situation of both the poet and fox in this verse, it can be seen that both are the lonely figures and the expression of their joy is also similar. It is brought to the readers in a simple and direct language. The non-human does not stand as a phenomenon different than humans but exists with humans on the same scale. As Satish Kumar draws out, “Whatever is born and will die is nature” (Kumar 1 Soil, Soul, Society) presenting holistic view of the existence on the Earth, the poet too shows that the humans do not stand separate than the other creatures on the Earth.

The divide between nature/culture and wild/civilization is broken by the poet through his verses which show both these binaries coexisting equally. They do not stand separately but instead the way is opened to submerge them. In the poem titled as ‘Firefly in My Room’ the opening of the window works to erase the boundaries between nature and culture. In the sleepless night the poet opens the window to “invite a breeze” (Bond 32) and firefly enters. This poem has the setting of

an enclosed room and as it is suggested the poet had an “unhappy day” (Bond 32) which is made joyful by the firefly. The movement of firefly and the movement of the poet are completely opposite. When the firefly is shown as lively moving “from floor, or wall/ or ceiling, never long in one place” (Bond 32) the poet is shown as lying sleepless. The darkness of the room is lit up by the presence of firefly and gloom is gone. But the verse does not end without poet’s willingness to welcome it again. There is no resistance to the non-human in the place of humans, the way in the previous verse analyzed here where both exist peacefully in the abode of nonhumans. It is “a friendly presence” (Bond 32) as the poet says in this verse and his had been “a friendly presence” as can be inferred from the last verse analyzed here. The poet “left/ The window open, just in case/ It should return” (Bond 32). The view presented by Satish Kumar criticizing the world view directed by speciesism, “Humans have come to believe that they are separate from nature and above nature. Nature is out *there*: the forests, the rivers, the birds and other wildlife; and we humans are *here*, enclosed in our homes, palaces, castles, apartments, offices, cars, trains and aeroplanes”(Kumar 1 Soil, Soul, Society) is not exemplified by the poet but instead humans walk in the land of animals and other creatures come to the place where humans live.

Similarly, the poet allows a lizard to enter his room in another verse titled as, ‘Rain’ and the poet says, “You too have your life to live/ Your race to run”. (Bond 33) He avoids disturbing a snake in the verse titled as ‘After Days in Rain’. Such a behavior as shown by the poet through his work, exemplifies as Greg Garrard has mentioned in his *Ecocriticism* “Through poetry, then we learn that, “Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of being” (Garrard 31, 32)

In the verses of Ruskin Bond, the space is given to the small creatures whose existence is ignored or not taken into serious consideration by human beings in day to day life in the modern time as can be found in the verse titled as ‘Song of the Cockroach’. In it the poet makes cockroach the speaker of the poem who warns humans and criticizes humans for their destructive acts while provides an apocalyptic vision of the world. Ecocritics may object the attribution of language speaking to the cockroach but it can also be helpful from ecocritical perspective. Wendell Berry points out in his ‘The Presence of Nature in the Natural World: A Long Conversation’, “ A human centered and even a self-centered point of view is inevitable- What other point of view can a human have?- but by imagination, sympathy, and charity *only* are we able to recognize the actuality and necessity of other points of view” (Berry)This verse can be seen as the poet’s work of imagination that brings into attention more capacity to survive, on the part of small creatures despite human acts that may call for their self destruction than human beings themselves.

It should also be noted that unlike Ted Hughes in whose poems the animals stand to show human acts, the acts shown in this verse are characteristics of the cockroach itself. Cockroach describes with itself, “beetle and bed-bug and bluebottle-fly” (Bond 82) as “the survivors” and mentions about the fouls of human beings. It says, “Your poison can’t touch us” (Bond 82). It also mentions the gases that are spread in the environment which has capacity to “choke” (Bond 82) human beings but seem to it, “the choosiest perfumes” (Bond 82). The poet ends the verse by warning,

“So carry on turning

Earth’s treasures to ruins,

We will sit here and laugh.

While you build your own tomb” (Bond 82)

Taking into consideration the section under which the verse is put, which is, ‘Humour’ the tone of the poem is justified by the laughing of the cockroach to the acts of human beings by which the poet satirizes, mocks at human acts of industrialization leading to destruction and possible eraser of the human race on the Earth.

In the similar vein of the critique of human acts can be seen in the verse titled as ‘The Pool’ where the poet mourns over the loss of the pool where he had spent his days of childhood. Though the poet muses over the time he had spent with his “closer than brothers, a colorful band” (Bond 61) the mourning tone is created at the beginning of it when the poet directly asks, “Where has it gone” (Bond 61). The critique of industrialization, which is inferred from the previous verse discussed here, finds direct expression in this verse when the poet says, “Gone is the pool, now filled in with rocks,/ Having made way for the builders’ blocks”(Bond 61)

It is often human tendency to associate the voices of the birds or animals with the good luck or bad omen as can be found in the Romantic poet like Coleridge in his ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ but when Ruskin Bond talks about the night birds like owl and bat, he presents the real picture of them without associating them with human beliefs. In the poem titled as ‘The Owl’, the poet brings into attention the positive side of the owl by calling it “The forest’s sentinel” (Bond 34). Though owl is generally perceived with negative connotations, the poet says, “A friendly presence his!”(Bond 34). This phrase reminds one of the similar phrases used by the poet in the context of firefly. From this, it can be inferred that the poet does not see the both the races, the race of firefly and owl, differently because of the general perception of it. Thus, the ecocritical insight as put forward by Greg Garrard while citing Mary Midgley, “Overlooking somebody’s race is entirely sensible. Overlooking their species is a supercilious insult” (Garrard 137) does not apply in the case of Ruskin Bond, who treats the species he encounters around him equally in his works and gives their space to them. The poet also acknowledges the hooting as a natural characteristic of the owl, which seems to him as natural as the speaking ability of the human beings. The poet seems to justify “Heidegger’s notion that we must ‘let beings be’ precisely in and through language” (Garrard 47) as mentioned by Greg Garrard. Instead of the negative connotations associated with the owl like ignorance and ill-omen, to the poet “it seems to cry, /‘The night is good— all’s well, all’s well’” (Bond 34). The use of language is significant here. The poet uses the word “seems” with which he avoids to authenticate his voice as a humane being interpreting the voice of a non-human.

Conclusion:

Thus, it can be said that the verses of Ruskin Bond do not use nature only as a background but as the main concern in his work. They do not undervalue the other creatures on the Earth and

acknowledges their right and existence. As Greg Garrard says, “One of the crucial modes of proper letting be or unhindered disclosure of being is poetry”(Garrard 31) , the poet too allows different kinds of creatures in his verses whose existence is considered without taking into consideration what they can contribute to the human race. Humans and non-humans are shown as entering each other’s places without harming anyone. The boundaries between them are erased and the poet shows the sign of considering all these creatures equally which makes his avoidance of the speciesism visible. Besides this, the poet also criticizes humans for their destructive acts and warns them about the end of humans on the Earth. Considering these, it can be said that the verses of Ruskin Bond show the ecocritical concerns imbibed in them while depicting idyllic human-nature relationship.

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