

## **"Return Again Like the Birds" - Representation of nature and environmental concerns in Ruskin Bond's "A Little World of Mud"**

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### **Abstract**

Ruskin Bond happens to be one of the most well known names in the field of Indian Literature, who keeps on writing amidst and about nature with all its diverse beauty in an age surrounded by cacophonous consumerism. The authentic, honest, almost child-like delineation of daily life in his stories demand critical attention. Ecocriticism, an upcoming theoretical tool that combines literature with ecological concerns, can be a perfect tool to revisit the representation of nature in his oeuvre. Using ecocriticism as the chief lens, this research article attempts to look at Ruskin Bond's ecological concerns, as found in his story "A Little World of Mud."

**Keywords:** Story, ecocriticism, place, non-human, worldview.

In an interview with Shabir Hussain Mirza, Ruskin Bond said about his writing,

"I like writing short stories because it catches the intensity of the moment and gets the essence of it and I am an impatient writer and a short story can be written in two or three days while a novel takes at least a couple of years to get completed. Children's stories I too enjoy writing because I was always good at writing about childhood and so as I grew older I found it more interesting to write for children and about childhood." (Bond 153)

Towards the end of the same interview he adds that,

"I try to tell a good story and in the process try to reveal something about human nature or the joys and the sorrows of day-to-day living." (Bond 159)

It is precisely his love for short stories, children's literature and above all "the joys and sorrows of day-to-day life" which proves the fact that his artistic self has an undeniable inclination towards simplicity which manifests throughout his creative practices. This simplicity of thought and writing demands an ecological approach to his works that can reveal a novel dimension of his simplicity.

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary method of studying literary texts from the perspective of environmental concerns. It has been defined by Cheryll Glodfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* as "the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment." (Glodfelty and Fromm xviii) It means that in this critical approach, ecology performs a mammoth function in analyzing the text. Prof. Pramod K. Nayar writes that,

"Ecocriticism originates in a bio-social context of unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of nature, worrying definitions and shapes of 'development' and environmental hazard. While it does not seek to alter the course of any of these very real factors, its task is to see how theoretically informed readings of cultural texts can contribute not only to consciousness raising but also look into the politics of development and the construction of 'nature'." (Nayar)

Under this circumstances ecocriticism tries to illustrate, various issues like "nature-writing texts to add to the canon in literary and cultural studies", the significance of "place", "environmental awareness" in canonical writings, treatment of the "non human" life-forms, underlying "anthropomorphic, patriarchal and capitalistic" ideologies, representation of the superiority of "rationality", a "socio-political framework", "literary examples within social discourses and acts of development, modernity, urbanization, demography" and above all a link to be established with "environmental activism." (Nayar)

Ruskin Bond's story "A Little World of Mud", taken from his *Tigers Forever*, like many of his tales, deals with the tiny Bond and his grandfather. It does not have any compact plot containing a beginning, middle and end in its Aristotelian sense. Written more in the form of a memoir, the story talks, at first, of how his grandfather introduced the little speaker, a mouthpiece of young Bond, to the "little world" of "the rain-water pond behind our house in north India." (Bond 37)

Both of them waited and observed for almost ten minutes before

"a small black blob appeared in the middle of the pond; gradually it rose higher, until at last we could make out a frog's head, its grey eyes staring hard at us. He did not know if we were friend or enemy and kept his body out of sight." (Bond 37-38)

His Grandfather explains to little Bond the lives of the frogs in the pond. Later we see Bond taking some of the frogs home in a large glass jar and getting caught red handed before the grandparents. He could recall that, "They were furious when they discovered that my frogs were the cause of the noise" they heard at about four o'clock in the morning. (Bond 40)

The story takes a completely different turn from this phase, Bond again recalls finding the pond "occupied by buffaloes" and their owner "a boy a little older than me" swimming there. (Bond 40)

He comes to know that his name is Ramu, from whom he tried to learn swimming. The story ends with Ramu telling Bond stories from the folkloric world, which exemplifies the divinity and sacredness of non-human creatures.

Bond's "A Little World of Mud", as suggested already by the title, is more about the natural "world" than Bond, Ramu or his Grandfather. What this emphasizes upon is the sense of place and belonging attached to it. The "rain water pond" becomes the locale of many creatures and germinates several 'world's which, in unison, turns out to be "a little world of mud." In the beginning of the tale, we see the 'space' of the mud is occupied by frogs and tadpoles.

"When he (a frog) had made sure we (Bond and his grandfather) were not herons, he informed his friends and neighbors, and soon there were several big heads and eyes just above the surface of the water. Throats swelled, and a *wurk, wurk, wurk* began.

In the shallow water near the tree we could see a dark shifting shadow. When touched with the end of a stick, the dark mass immediately became alive. Thousands of little black tadpoles wriggled into life, pushing and hustling each other." (Bond 39)

We are able to see a minute and at the same time, intimate poetic description of the lives of the frogs in the pond.

Towards the end of the tale, Bond meets Ramu, a boy almost of his own age in the pond, which reflects another form of living, placing the pond itself as the locale again. The 'space' of the pond gets occupied again, differently.

"One day, when I reached the pond. I found it occupied by buffaloes. Their owner, a little boy older than me, was swimming about in the middle of the pond. He pulled himself up on one of his buffaloes, stretched his slim round body out on the animal's glistening back and started singing to himself." (Bond 40)

The juxtaposition of both scenarios paves the way for a harmonious habitat, where different life-forms both human and non-human exist simultaneously without sabotaging the right of the other. All these create a sense of belonging about a place that is shared by everyone occupying it.

Again, towards the end of the story from the conversations with Ramu we get to know about the divinity of non-human creatures which finds its space in many regional folklores.

"Many birds are sacred," he told me, as a bluejay swooped down from the peepul tree and carried off a grasshopper. Ramu said that both the bluejay and the god Shiva were called *Nilkanth*." (Bond 41)

It seemed previously that the natives of the region are closer to nature than the seemingly 'elite' world, but Bond's purpose is not to wage a war, but to create harmony amidst classes and species. That's why at the end, both Ramu, who came from "a family of...farmers and had received no schooling" (Bond 41) and Bond's grandfather felt "that we should be more gentle with birds and animals, that we should not kill them indiscriminately." (Bond 42)

The greatest lesson of the story has been given by the grandfather,

"Everywhere, birds and animals are finding it more difficult to live because we are destroying their forests. They have to keep moving as the trees disappear." (Bond 42)

This is one of the most profound messages one can share from an environmental awareness.

Ruskin Bond's stories always present a worldview where the human and non-human live in harmony, both being an integral part of the daily life of the other, pointing towards a better world.

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Debayan Das has completed his B.A. in English from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, West Bengal and is now about to complete his M.A. in English from Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. He has presented papers in many national and international conferences.