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The Therapeutic Wilderness and Deep Ecology: Tracing Biocentric Equality and Spiritual Healing in Ruskin Bond's Nature Narratives

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Abstract

This research paper presents a detailed and ecocritical study of how the themes of Deep Ecology, spiritual healing and biocentric equality intersect in the literature of Ruskin Bond, in particular *The Book of Nature*, *The Room on the Roof*, and other material such as *Vagrants in the Valley* and *Dust on the Mountains*. This paper examines Bond's creation of an intrinsic value for all flora and fauna beyond the anthropocentric neatness of considering nature as a resource or a neutral visual background. This study aims to show that Bond makes the natural world come alive and the spiritual guardian through his storytelling devices. In addition, the paper explores in detail the therapeutic role of the wilderness in reducing human trauma, alienation, and physical and mental illnesses. In the end, it suggests that Bond's quiet and powerful environmentalism is about utilising Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as a tool to promote ethical responsibility and a symbiotic relationship between people and their environment.

Keywords: Traditional Ecological Knowledge, therapeutic, spiritual guardian, ethical responsibility

Introduction

In today's literature, the destructive consequences of industrialization and urbanization on the environment has led to an important orientation to ecological awareness. The indelible legacies Ruskin Bond has left on India's literary landscape have stemmed from his time spent in the foothills of the Himalayas in Dehradun, Mussoorie and Shimla for most of his life, where he was called the "resident Wordsworth" of India. These mountains, rivers and woods are part and parcel of him, his identity and literary output. Bond is not one of the writers who uses the natural world only as a backdrop for their story, but one who explores the whole of an environment and the philosophical aspects of ecology at length.

This paper offers an extended ecocritical analysis of Bond's works based on the theoretical framework of Deep Ecology. Deep Ecology is a philosophy coined by philosopher Arne Naess, which questions the anthropocentric world-view, i.e. the human-centred or anthropocentric view into the world which considers everyone and everything as of value only if it is useful to humans. In this context, this paper will examine how Bond's works align with biocentric equality – as a place of spiritual solace for the "alienated" and as a powerful indictment of modernism's rampant existence by calling for ethical and sustainable co-existence among humans and their environments.

Deep ecology is a biological point of view that is rooted in the belief that all life on earth is valuable for its own sake and that humankind must show great respect for the interwoven ecosystems. This is the philosophy that pervades Ruskin Bond's writing, and he believes in a "whole world" philosophy that views the world as a whole system rather than an isolated sum of its parts that humans can consume.

In *The Book of Nature* Bond exhaustively dissects anthropocentrism, emphasizing the value of each element of the ecology, regardless of its apparent degree of insignificance. He highlights the interdependence of life on various elevations of the Himalayas and its reliance on plants, mammals, birds and insects. Biocentric equality is evident from him when he compares the worth of a blade of grass to a human life. He "must admit grass is a good thing... It wouldn't be much fun living on a planet where grass can't grow. Moreover, Bond did not see the mice with little insects as being on the "lower" level of the ecosystem; he was awestruck by the smallest of the insects, the "fairy fly", and its tiny wings and legs, "perfection" in a tiny world.

In addition Bond is critical of the "economic," utilitarian perception of nature that has taken hold in modern society. He bemoans the removal of old, banyan trees and sacred groves, and the "greed of man" that is ruining ecological balance for the sake of development. Nature is not related to human prayer or wishes; for Bond, as he writes in *The Book of Nature*, "Nature doesn't promise you anything, it is a reward in itself". Bond's writing reminds readers of the principles of Deep Ecology, as he promotes the rights of the panthers, the leopards, the trees and the insects to live free.

An essential feature of Bond's ecocritical perspective is his rejection of the natural as a mere background against which to foreground human activity. Rather, nature is an organic, dynamic

presence with a power or agency to influence, guide and protect the human characters. Rather, the setting is often an emblem of spiritual sustenance in Bond's stories.

The spiritual element is clearly illustrated in Bond's relationship with trees. Trees are not only trees for timber and shade; they are living beings and moral advisors. They remind Bond of "the guardians of my conscience," whom he calls under their "highly principled supervision. As in the short story "The Cherry Tree" by C.M. Bowers, planting a tree moves beyond the physical and is a sacred communion. Rakesh touches his cherry tree as it faces adversity and finally blooms, asking himself, "Is this what it is like to be God?" - Nurturing nature is a way of connecting humans to the Divine process of creation.

The majestic Himalayas also serve as spiritual compass in Bond's work. The mountains represent eternity, strength and continuity, heralding a contrast with the upheavals and impermanence of contemporary human life. They are inspiring and humbling, and help to build characters patience and resilience. Another example of nature's active role is in other stories, such as *The Hidden Pool* and *The Last Tonga Ride*, where nature's characters – sacred rivers, secluded pools etc. – become magical sites of exploration and discovery where the character has to deal with ideas of existence and find wonder in nature.

Along with its own spiritual leadership, the natural environment of Bond's writing becomes a powerful therapeutic healer of human trauma and alienation and ailments beyond. Society, culture differences, or their own traumatic history keep Bond's characters separated from one another. In the times of sorrow, the wilderness is a place of comfort, a sanctuary of the soul, a refuge to be filled with psychological healing.

This therapeutic dynamic is at the heart of Bond's debut novel: *The Room on the Roof* and sequel, *Vagrants in the Valley*. Rusty is a sixteen-year-old Anglo-Indian boy living in Dehradun, who finds himself on a fault-line between two worlds, between his European guardian who lives by a strict code and his inability to conform with Indian society. There are so many artificial, oppressive aspects of his guardian's home, enclosed by high walls, with closed windows, and in contrast to the freedom of the natural world. Nature provides warmth and security to a child when he is left an orphan. The wind and leaves whisper to Rusty as he finds shelter under the trees, providing him with the "warmth and chillness and shade of a mother". Rusty's mental health greatly improves when he is able to get close to nature, and he

is able to overcome his sense of helplessness and self-pity. The peaceful woodlands and the lively beats of the rain virtually erase the stern traces of his guardian's influence, helping him to heal and to grow.

Nature's healing ability is in physical and great psychological healing, too. In the novel, *Delhi is Not Far*, Bond's character Suraj is afflicted by occasional fits and finds the healing power of the hills. The hills are, according to the narrator, where Suraj will be cured by 'Mother Nature', surrounded by pines, deodars and the magnificent scenery of Nanda Devi, thus making the narrator's point that nature has the power to cure people as Bond believed in Wordsworth's belief in the therapeutic power of nature.

In proclaiming the healing and spiritual power of nature, Bond's works do not ignore the bleak realities of the ecology crisis. His stories have the power to challenge anthropocentric attitudes of arrogance and unlimited industrial growth in a respectful way towards the surrounding environment.

Stories such as "Dust on the Mountains" vividly show Bond's graphic vision of the terrible repercussions of unrestricted modernization. He depicts the devastation resulting from the quarries of limestone, mountains dynamited by dynamite, the trees, birds, shrubs being removed from the land, and the clouds of dust that engulf the scene. This ecological devastation results in social and emotional instability in the community. In the story, though, Bond challenges the human hubris in an amazing incident of a truck crash. MEN's lives are saved when Pritam Singh's truck comes rolling down a now-drunken mountain road, only to be miraculously saved by a sturdy tree. This is quite a powerful moment that shows the human race is utterly reliant on the planet's life-giving forces despite their misjudgements and environmental damage.

In "No Room for a Leopard," Bond proceeds to criticize anthropocentric attitudes. Wildlife is displaced from forests to valleys as forests are being cleared at a rapid rate. A leopard is a follower of a man that it trusts and follows and is killed by the shikaris (hunters) for the money value of its skin, it is a flesh of money. When a leopard follows a man it trusts, and follows, and then it is mercilessly hunted and killed by shikaris (hunters) only for the money value of its skin, is a flesh of money. In the human-centered quest for profit, empathy is lost, and sacred connection to the wild is broken, Bond cautions.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Respectful Co-existence Bond promotes a caring and empathetic approach to the non-human world, often challenging the exploitative nature of the dominant culture and economy, which is strongly contrasted with TEK. The stories highlight the knowledge of local villagers and indigenous communities, their sustainable practices and a respect for the natural cycles of the earth.

This regionalism and veneration of nature clearly reflects the actual eco-feminist and ecological struggle prevailing in the region, for instance, the Chipko movement in the Garhwal Himalayas movement of the local women tied trees to the trees that were being cut down by contractors. Bond's poems are all about the same preservationist message that states we are not the owners or masters of the Earth, but are responsible for keeping it taken care of such that "the rivers keep flowing, / the forests keep growing, / and the birds keep singing".

His soft-spot environmental activism is achieved not by telling, but through the reader's connection and empathy towards the environment. Bond proposes that the humanity need to regain its primal ecological awareness, as the innocence of children such as Rusty, Bisnu, and Rakesh learn the importance of conserving trees and animals.

7. Conclusion

Ruskin Bond's books *The Book of Nature*, *The Room on the Roof*, and his unpublished writings are an ecocritical study of the relationship between man and nature. In his stories Bond succeeds in effectively challenging the anthropocentrism, a world where the rule of biocentric equality prevails, and where each organism, from the tall deodar to the small fairy fly, has intrinsic value. In Bond's imagining, nature is not just a backdrop; it is alive and a guardian spirit over the moral growth of humans. As a special healing space, the wilderness can heal the wounds and physical ill-health and identity crisis of people such as Rusty and Suraj, which are often unavailable in human society. In parallel, Bond delivers a poignant commentary on unchecked modernization, calling for Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to be embraced as part of humanity's care for the environment, and for its ethical responsibilities. In conclusion, his works are a reminder that sustainability and respectful co-existence with the natural world are inseparable parts of our survival, mental health, and spiritual fulfillment, and that we will need to adopt such a standpoint if we want to have a future that reflects this.

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