

Harmonizing with the Earth: Ecocentric Undertones in Ruskin Bond's Literary Canvas

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Abstract

This essay explores the ecocentric approach employed by Ruskin Bond in his short stories, focusing on the significance of nature as a central character. By analyzing selected works, including "The Cherry Tree," "Coral Tree," "When You Can't Climb Trees," and "The Prospect of Flowers," the essay reveals how Bond intricately weaves nature into his narratives, highlighting its importance in character development, plot advancement, and thematic exploration. Through the portrayal of nature as an active participant in the stories, Bond evokes ecoconsciousness and stimulates an ecological awakening in readers. This investigation of "The Prospect of Flowers" and other short stories by Bond serves as compelling evidence of his ecocentric approach, underscoring the enduring relevance of nature in literature as a means to deepen our connection with the environment and inspire environmental stewardship.

Key words: Ecocentric, nature, central character, Ruskin Bond, short stories, ecoconsciousness

Introduction

Nature holds a prominent position in the realm of literature, transcending its traditional role as a mere setting to emerge as a dynamic and integral character in numerous literary works. Over the course of literary history, writers have recognized the profound significance of nature, harnessing its inherent power to evoke deep emotions, convey complex themes, and provoke introspection. Beyond its aesthetic allure, nature serves as a catalyst for ecological consciousness, prompting a heightened awareness of our interconnectedness with the natural world. By portraying nature as a central character, writers delve into the intricate tapestry of human-nature relationships, illuminating the reciprocal influence between the environment and human existence. This essay aims to explore the pivotal role of nature in literature, emphasizing its profound significance in fostering ecoconsciousness and inspiring an ecological awakening. Through an examination of notable works, it becomes evident that the portrayal of nature as a central character not only enriches the literary

experience but also serves as a potent instrument for environmental contemplation and enlightenment.

The objective of this essay is to analyze the short stories of Ruskin Bond from an ecocentric perspective, focusing on his writing style that places nature at the center of his narratives. Bond, a highly acclaimed author known for his compelling storytelling, consistently highlights the significance of nature in his works. This examination aims to explore the depth and centrality of Bond's portrayal of the natural world, particularly in terms of character development, plot progression, and thematic resonance. By approaching Bond's stories objectively from an ecocentric lens, we can uncover the ecological consciousness embedded within his writing and underscore the importance of acknowledging and appreciating the interconnection between humanity and the environment. Through this exploration, a deeper understanding of Bond's treatment of nature will be gained, emphasizing the enduring relevance of an ecocentric perspective in literary analysis.

Ecocentric Perspective

In a staunch and argumentative manner, ecocentrism, a scholarly perspective rooted in ethics, has gained considerable prominence as a subject of discourse within the realm of literature. It vehemently opposes the prevailing anthropocentric outlook that arrogantly asserts human superiority and detachment from nature, instead placing a profound emphasis on the intricate interdependence of all life forms and the ecosystem as a whole. Over the course of time, there has been an unmistakable and discernible inclination in literature to embrace ecocentrism, as authors endeavor to unveil the intricate connections existing among humans, other species, and the natural environment through their literary creations. These works serve to underscore the inherent value attributed to each organism, thereby facilitating a comprehensive exploration of significant literary trends such as eco-fiction and environment writing. These particular literary movements serve as vanguards in championing ecological values and propagating ecological awareness to the masses.

Bond and Nature

"The Coral Tree," a short story from the collection *The Night Train at Deoli* (1988), takes on an ecocentric perspective, highlighting the intrinsic value of nature and the interconnection between humans and the natural environment. Set in an anonymous small-town, the story revolves around the protagonist's visit to his grandfather's house, where a coral tree stands as a central element. This tree, surrounded by pools of water and fallen blossoms, symbolizes both the narrator's personal responsibilities and the resilience of life despite adversity.

The small-town people, deeply rooted in their connection with nature, exemplify strength and resilience. However, Bond also portrays their yearning for the city lifestyle, reflecting the influence of urbanization on their aspirations. The narrator himself plans to move to England, indicating a desire for independence and exploration beyond his small-town upbringing.

Through the encounter with a small-town girl, Bond emphasizes the purity and innocence of youth, as well as the shared aspirations between the narrator and the girl. The coral tree becomes a symbol of their growing bond, as the narrator retrieves flowers from it for the girl. The coral tree acts as a silent observer of their blossoming friendship.

Bond uses the coral tree as a metaphor to convey the importance of nurturing and planting trees, emphasizing their significance in a polluted and environmentally challenged world. In his short story, "Boyhood Dreams," Bond remarks, "There is a great affinity between trees and men. We grow at much the same pace, if we are not hurt or starved or cut down. In our youth we are resplendent creatures, and in our declining years we stoop a little, we remember, we stretch our brittle limbs in the sun, and then, with a sigh, we shed our last leaves" (Bond, 103-104). This quote highlights the interconnectedness between trees and humans, with their lives reflecting each other's journey.

The story reflects Bond's deep affinity towards nature and his concern for the environment. He highlights the serene life that can be attained through a harmonious relationship with nature. Archana Singh comments, "Ruskin Bond's stories echo his concern towards the devastating environment which is the result of the ignorance of man, and his approach to lead a luxurious life. Bond's stories are imaginative and honest revelations of his sensitivity towards nature" (Singh, 129).

Bond's sensitivity towards nature is prevalent in "The Coral Tree" and resonates with ecocentric perspectives.

Additionally, "The Coral Tree" can be seen as a postcolonial work, capturing the remnants of British influence on Indian society. Abraham remarks, "Ruskin Bond's *The Coral Tree* is considered to be an important post-colonial short story. The story was important because it epitomized the creativity of post-colonial literature" (Abraham, 171). The story subtly explores the impact of colonialism on the social landscape, while maintaining a focus on human interactions and the beauty found within them.

"The Cherry Tree" by Ruskin Bond illustrates the significance of trees in human life. The story revolves around a small-town boy named Rakesh, who lives with his grandfather, a retired forest ranger. Rakesh buys cherries from the market because his village lacks fruit trees. When Rakesh asks his grandfather about the luck associated with cherry seeds, his grandfather advises him to plant the seed rather than keeping it aside (Bond, TNTD 133-134).

The act of planting the cherry seed symbolizes the importance of nurturing and utilizing natural resources. In their garden, Rakesh and his grandfather grow vegetables and medicinal plants instead of fruit trees, suggesting a connection to the land and the desire to sustain themselves. Bond portrays the small-town people as having a natural inclination towards gardening, reflecting their inherent connection with nature (Bond, TNTD 135).

Despite facing setbacks, such as the cherry tree being eaten by a goat and later cut down accidentally, the tree perseveres and continues to grow. This resilience serves as a metaphor for the human capacity to face challenges with hope and overcome them. The cherry tree becomes a source of inspiration and a lesson for Rakesh, teaching him not to lose hope in the face of adversity (Bond, TNTD 135).

Throughout the story, Bond emphasizes the transformative power of trees and their role in shaping human lives. He views trees as guardians of conscience, a source of rejuvenation, and a means of communion with the Divine. Bond's own upbringing surrounded by various trees in Dehradun influenced his deep connection with nature, which is reflected in his writings (Bond, 44). Rakesh's close relationship with trees and his childhood experiences of climbing them, hiding treasures, and enjoying their fruits highlight the bond between children and nature (Mishra, 116).

"The Cherry Tree" is considered a significant work from an ecocritical standpoint. Scholars recognize Bond as an advocate for ecocentrism, highlighting ecological issues and critiquing the adverse impacts of urbanization on the environment. Bond's ideology promotes the sacredness of nature and stands in contrast to the anthropocentric perspectives prevalent in Western culture (Kumar, 263). The story encourages readers, particularly children, to develop an understanding of environmental issues and the importance of caring for the natural world (Mishra, 43).

The short story "When You Can't Climb Trees Anymore" from the current collection explores the profound ecological connection between the narrator and a jackfruit tree. Through the narrator's grandmother's opening statement, "A blessing rests on the house where falls the shadow of a tree" (Bond, TNTD 238), the significance of trees in human life is poignantly emphasized. Returning to his grandmother's house in the ecocentric setting of Dehra, a small town steeped in childhood memories, the narrator reflects upon the joyful times he spent in that very dwelling. His encounter with a sixteen-year-old girl during his visit triggers a voyage back to his formative years: "Twenty-five years ago. When I was a boy. And then again, when I was a young man until my grandmother died, and then we sold the house, and went away" (Bond, TNTD 239).

At present, the girl's family occupies the house, and perceptive of the narrator's thoughts, she extends an invitation for him to revisit his former abode. With assurance that her parents would not object to her bringing friends inside, she asks if the narrator is permitted to bring adult companions. Curiosity about the narrator's age leads to a playful exchange. Immersed in the ecocentric ambiance of his childhood hometown, the narrator is rejuvenated by a youthful vigor coursing through his veins. This interplay between the character of the small-town girl, the surrounding environment, and

the narrator effectively evokes his inner child. Demonstrating his renewed vitality, the narrator chooses to scale the wall instead of using the gate, breathlessly exclaiming, "Middle-aged man on the flying trapeze" (Bond, TNTD 239), with the girl's assistance in descending. Both find solace on a stone bench beneath a mango tree, the same spot where his grandmother once sat.

A profound silence envelops them as they sit there, and the man, with closed eyes, immerses himself in a tapestry of memories: the melodic strains of a piano, the resonating chimes of a grandfather clock, the constant twittering of budgerigars on the verandah, and the echoes of his grandfather cranking up the old car (Bond, TNTD 240). Through the narrator's persona, Ruskin Bond artfully weaves a narrative of recollections from his own childhood, marked by adventures of tree climbing and the concealment of precious treasures. These anecdotes symbolize the lives of small-town boys, whose leisure hours were predominantly spent in harmonious communion with nature. The tree in question, with its inviting branches, served as a sanctuary effortlessly scaled during the narrator's formative years. Prompted by the little girl's inquiry about revisiting this arboreal haven, the narrator, fatigued by his earlier wall-climbing exploit, opts for a seated conversation, affirming, "I mention the jackfruit tree because it was my favourite place" (Bond, TNTD 240). The tree's significance lies in its role as a repository for his cherished belongings, including marbles, old coins, and his grandfather's medal.

The little girl exudes unbridled excitement at the prospect of uncovering a hidden treasure after a quarter of a century. With swift and graceful agility, she springs up, dashing across the grass and ascending the jackfruit tree, her limbs brimming with vitality. As a warm wind stirs up tiny eddies of dust along the road, the palpable sense of summer permeates the air. In this transformative moment, the narrator yearns for the ability to rediscover the joy of tree climbing, to once again be at one with nature (Bond, TNTD 241).

Ruskin Bond, employing the narrator's perspective, evokes memories of his childhood days in which he would climb trees and hide his treasures. These activities serve as a symbolic representation of the lives of small-town boys, who spent much of their playtime immersed in nature. The narrator reminisces about the tree he used to easily climb and spent countless hours in during his youth. When the little girl asks if he wants to climb it again, he declines, feeling weary after climbing the wall. Instead, he suggests they sit and engage in conversation, stating, "I mention the jackfruit tree because it was my favorite place" (Bond, TNTD 240). This special place held significance to him as he would conceal his prized possessions, such as marbles, old coins, and his grandfather's medal.

Bond expresses a profound connection to trees, particularly those that become an indelible part of one's childhood, especially his own. Scholars have recognized this aspect in Bond's writings, classifying them as nostalgic autobiographical snippets within his stories. Bond adopts an ecocentric perspective, asserting that every element of nature, whether mundane or grand, beautiful or unsightly, possesses intrinsic value and plays a distinct role. To Bond, trees and plants assume the role of guardian spirits, especially after his parents' separation and his father's tragic passing. In stories like "My Father's Trees in Dehra," "When You Can't Climb Any More," and "Coming Home to Dehra," he envisions his father returning to life through new shoots (Chawla 42).

Bond perceives trees as an essential component of human growth, an inseparable presence during the transition from childhood to adulthood. Nature becomes intricately intertwined with the lives of those who lead peaceful and virtuous existences. In "When You Cannot Climb the Trees Any More," the tree symbolizes the vitality of youth. A grandmother regards having a tree at home as a blessing. The immense jackfruit tree becomes a clandestine sanctuary for a young boy, as he discovers its potential for concealing cherished possessions like a catapult, marbles, twigs, and coins (Jachak 759). Mona Goel also emphasizes Bond's view of finding his lost father in the burgeoning shoots of trees (1062).

Within the current anthology of short stories, "The Prospect of Flowers" presents a compelling exploration of the significance of flowers in the lives of small-town individuals. The narrative revolves around two characters: Miss Mackenzie, an elderly English spinster, and Anil, a young schoolboy, both of whom share a profound appreciation for flowers. Miss Mackenzie, residing alone

in her grand abode, dedicates herself to tending the garden, while Anil, a resident of the same town, embodies the charm of a small-town upbringing. This tale unfolds against the backdrop of antiquated houses situated on the outskirts of Indian hill stations, each bearing names like "Fern Hill," "The Oaks," "Hunter's Lodge," "The Parsonage," "The Pines," "Dumbarnie," "Mackinnson's Hall," and "Windermere" (Bond, TNTD 110). Notably, some of these houses derive their names from trees, underscoring the reverence bestowed upon trees by the inhabitants of the small town. These houses, relics from the colonial era, symbolize bygone times under British rule in India. By employing such settings, Bond prompts readers to seek solace in these beautiful homes with spacious gardens, rather than seeking amusement in theaters and commercial centers.

Among the deserted old houses, Mulberry Lodge stands as a mansion and serves as the residence of Miss Mackenzie. Having arrived in India as a young girl during the British colonial era, Miss Mackenzie wholeheartedly embraces her new home and country, making it her permanent abode. With no family ties in India, she consciously chooses to reside there, recognizing the true splendor inherent in Indian country life. Like many lonely elderly individuals, she finds companionship in her pet, a large black cat with radiant yellow eyes (Bond, TNTD 111). Her existence mirrors that of countless elderly residents in the small town, characterized by humble simplicity. Bond portrays Miss Mackenzie's deep affection for flowers and the profound relationship she shares with them. Surrounding her dwelling, she tends a small garden adorned with a diverse array of flowers, including dahlias, gladioli, rare orchids, and chrysanthemums. While she may not possess extensive scholarly knowledge of flowers and trees, her intimate familiarity stems from a lifetime spent immersed in nature and small-town life.

Bond also captures the fascination of a small-town boy, Anil, with flowers. Like Miss Mackenzie, Anil is intrigued by the study of flowers. He roams the small town in search of different types of flowers, engrossed in his observations. Fortuitously, Anil stumbles upon Miss Mackenzie's garden and ventures inside to investigate the floral wonders. Initially trespassing, he eventually forms a friendship with the solitary elderly English spinster. Miss Mackenzie is astounded by Anil's interest in flowers and his aspiration to become a botanist. She remarks, "Most boys at your age want to be pilots or soldiers or perhaps engineers. But you want to be a botanist. Well, well. There is still hope for the world" (Bond, TNTD 112). Through Miss Mackenzie, Bond highlights that amidst the prevailing ambitions of becoming engineers and pilots, there are children in small towns who envision their future in the realm of nature.

Miss Mackenzie admires the young boy's dream of becoming a botanist and introduces him to the book *Flora Himaliensis*, published in 1892. It is the sole source encompassing knowledge of all the flowers in the world. Bond, through the character of Miss Mackenzie, suggests that while botanists engage in meticulous work within the confines of four walls, peering through microscopes, they miss out on the opportunity to explore the mountains and gain firsthand knowledge of flowers. As Miss Mackenzie imparts her wisdom about flowers to Anil, he diligently records the names of various flowers and their respective blooming seasons. Anil's profound interest and fondness for flowers prompt him to visit Miss Mackenzie regularly, and a genuine bond develops between them. Bond portrays their relationship as that of a grandmother and grandson, where Miss Mackenzie yearns for love and care, and Anil fulfills that role. In small towns, boys often hold a deep affection for their grandparents, drawn not only to their storytelling but also to their genuine love and care.

When Anil departs for his vacation, Miss Mackenzie presents him with the book *Flora Himaliensis*, desiring it to be in the right hands. However, Anil hesitates to accept it, as he plans to return the following year so they can continue learning together. Miss Mackenzie's foresight leads her to entrust the book to Anil, believing it will be in capable hands. After Anil's departure, she becomes even lonelier, spending most of her time in bed during the winter season, yearning for the warmth of spring and summer. The story concludes with the line, "Miss Mackenzie had gone away to the mountain where the blue genitan and purple columbine grew" (TNTD), signifying Miss Mackenzie's passing. Despite her struggle with loneliness, the small-town life, the flowers in her garden, and the presence of Anil, the aspiring botanist, give purpose and meaning to her life.

The story at hand illuminates the significance of intergenerational relationships, particularly emphasizing the bond between older individuals and young people. In line with Bond's recurring themes, the narrative exemplifies the harmonious connection between the elderly and children, offering valuable lessons on how the younger generation should approach and engage with their older counterparts. Bhat and Noval aptly observe, "Ruskin Bond has addressed several social issues in his short stories such as loneliness in old age and the mental fragility of the aged... his stories give the readers an empathetic rendering of the twilight years of their lives" (1552). Through works such as "The Kitemaker," "The Prospect of Flowers," "The Garlands on His Brow," and "The Cherry Tree," Bond masterfully paints a vivid portrayal of the conditions in which older individuals often find themselves, prompting readers to reevaluate their values and strive to bring peace and contentment to the elders in their lives.

Furthermore, Bhat and Noval, in their article titled "Ruskin Bond: A Tool to Elevate Ecoconsciousness," shed light on Bond's contribution to fostering ecological awareness, particularly among young readers. They remark, "In the stories- 'The Cherry Tree,' 'The Last Truck Ride,' 'The Prospect of Flowers,' and 'The Summer Season,' he gives us an insight into how nature is vital for man's survival... As long as his characters are able to preserve the balance in nature, they are able to function well on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level" (624). The annihilation of ecosystems disrupts this delicate equilibrium, causing the characters to feel disconnected from their inner selves, overwhelmed by a profound sense of discontent. Filled with a yearning to mend the damage inflicted upon their surroundings and heal themselves, these characters experience a profound sense of loss. Ruskin Bond skillfully imparts to readers the importance of respecting nature as a means of respecting the divine (624).

Ruskin Bond's fiction stands as a testament to his profound appreciation and reverence for nature, which he refuses to marginalize, but instead centers as a prominent element in his works. Bond's storytelling exemplifies a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, allowing nature to occupy equal space and importance alongside his human characters. In his narratives, Bond skillfully weaves intricate descriptions of natural landscapes, flora, and fauna, emphasizing their beauty, significance, and role in shaping the lives of his characters. From the majestic mountains to the enchanting forests, Bond's portrayal of nature is vivid and immersive, inviting readers to develop a heightened awareness and appreciation for the environment. By dedicating substantial attention to nature, Bond effectively conveys the message that it is an integral part of human existence, deserving equal consideration and respect.

Moreover, Bond's ecological perspective goes beyond mere description and serves as a driving force in his narratives. Nature often assumes a proactive role, influencing the plot and character development. Bond's characters find solace, inspiration, and healing in their interactions with nature, be it through exploring the wilderness, tending to gardens, or observing the subtle wonders of the natural world. By showcasing the transformative power of nature, Bond highlights its intrinsic value and urges readers to recognize the essential connection between humans and the environment. Through his fiction, Bond serves as an advocate for ecological consciousness, reminding us of our responsibility to preserve and protect the natural world. In doing so, he demonstrates his commitment to giving nature an equal and central place in his storytelling, challenging prevailing narratives that relegate nature to a marginalized role in literature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ruskin Bond's fiction is a resounding testament to his ecocentric perspective, as evidenced by his depiction of nature in various short stories. In "The Prospect of Flowers," Bond illuminates the significance of flowers in the lives of small-town individuals, highlighting their importance through characters like Miss Mackenzie and Anil. Similarly, in "The Cherry Tree" and "Coral Tree," he vividly captures the transformative power of nature and the deep connection between humans and their natural surroundings. Additionally, in "When You Can't Climb Trees," Bond explores the impact of nature on a young boy's life, emphasizing the tree as a symbol of vitality and the tree-climbing experience as an integral part of childhood.

Throughout his stories, Bond weaves intricate descriptions of landscapes, flora, and fauna, offering readers a profound appreciation for the beauty and value of the natural world. Nature occupies equal space and significance alongside human characters, defying the marginalization that is often prevalent in literature. Bond's narratives exemplify how nature actively shapes the lives of his characters, providing solace, inspiration, and a connection to their roots.

By centering nature in his storytelling, Bond nurtures ecological consciousness and compels readers to acknowledge the profound impact of human actions on the environment. His evocative portrayals and character-driven plots highlight the transformative power of nature, inspiring readers to cultivate a deeper relationship with and reverence for the natural world.

In conclusion, Ruskin Bond's fiction serves as a compelling testament to the intrinsic value and interconnectedness between humans and nature. Through stories like "The Prospect of Flowers," "The Cherry Tree," "Coral Tree," and "When You Can't Climb Trees," Bond showcases the vital role that nature plays in shaping our lives and emphasizes the need for a harmonious relationship with the environment. By giving nature equal prominence and significance in his narratives, Bond challenges the marginalization of nature and urges readers to adopt an ecocentric perspective, fostering a deeper appreciation and stewardship of the natural world.

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