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BIOCENTRISM IN RUSKIN BOND'S "GRANDFATHER'S ZOO": ECOLOGICAL INTEGRATION

KEY WORDS: Ecocriticism, nature, culture, garden, animal-space, domesticated, bio-diversity

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ABSTRACT

Man's unsympathetic treatment of nature has placed him against ecological instability. For countering environmental degradation a branch of interdisciplinary study, namely Ecocriticism has emerged which asserts that for a balanced environmental ethics it is worthwhile to analyze human culture through the reassessment of the idea of 'Nature' as it appears in the writings of different writers. In the context of Indian writing in English conscious advocacy of nature came much later. It was Ruskin Bond who first displayed acute and scientific awareness about nature and natural phenomenon. The Mussoorie setting itself is an ecologically utopic zone with tremendous possibility of man-nature cohabitation. "Grandfathers' Zoo" set in part in Dehra and in part in Lucknow, objectifies man's attempt of building an eco-friendly ambience at the heart of human society. Garden embodies cultural artifacts while zoo or caging of animal point to the human conspiracy of placing species out of its own ecological niche. But grandfathers' garden boasts of a diversity of species which are allowed controlled space but no entrapment. The juxtaposition of animal life and cultural constructions opens up new dimension in man-nature relationship. Indeed, the tale incorporates several marked attempt of developing kinship with natural agents; and besides offers acute and scientific observations on ecological food chain, energy transfer, struggle for survival, biological habits of some species etc. Thus it can well be considered as Bond's manifesto on nature and its agents.

Is Nature your religion?' . . . It would be presumptuous to say so. Nature doesn't promise you anything – an after life, rewards for good behaviour, protection from enemies, wealth, happiness, progeny, all the things that humans desire and pray for. No, Nature does not promise these things. Nature is a reward in itself.

(Bond Intro.)

Man's apathetic treatment of nature has paradoxically put us in front of a global-ecological instability leading towards complete degradation. So insecure are we that we must avoid our suicidal ways in order to restore a healthy and balanced ecosphere. For formulating a balanced environmental ethics it is worthwhile to analyze human culture through a reassessment of the idea of 'Nature' as it appears in the writings of different writers who despite their urban sophisticated background voiced concern for nature. Thus to counter Ecological catastrophe and Bio-terrorism Ecocriticism (the term was introduced in the late 1970s, 'Literary Ecology' is the earlier version and 'Green Studies' is more popular in Britain) emerged as a branch of study; it is a systematic and interdisciplinary reading of the relationship between literature and environment with an awareness of the man-made damage on nature and with a motive of addressing and understanding contemporary environmental problems. Ecocritics approach literature from the point of view of nature and focus on earth itself instead of human beings and thereby induce a possibility of literary and cultural studies from an environmentalist viewpoint. Ecocritics while rereading major canonical works (with especial focus on the British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists) try to apply ecocentric concepts such as growth, balance, energy, circulation, entropy, symbiosis etc even to things which are not directly part of nature.¹ Ecocritics question social and linguistic norms and preconditions and reconsider them by emphasizing ecocentric values (for their aim is to challenge the fact that nature is actually an anthropomorphic construct, that is, it is culturally manufactured). They celebrate multiplicity and diversity in nature, for environmental essentialism or reductionism is as dangerous as pollution or other environmental hazards.² Ecocritics are enthusiastically concerned over certain issues, such as: the role of the physical setting of a literary work; the metaphor of 'land' or 'place'; bearing of scientific ecology with literature itself; and the connection between the natural world and the cultural artifacts of language and literature.³

Amid the nightmarish and disturbing phase in the ecosphere many concerned writers are preaching eco-philosophy in order to develop sympathetic bonding between man and nature. In their realistic approach 'Nature isn't always birdsong and dew-drenched daffodils' (Bond Intro.), but an awareness of the mutual interdependence and energy circulation through each and every cell. In the context of Indian writing in English conscious advocacy

of nature came much later. But it is Tagore's immortal lines – *Dao phire se aranyo, laho e nagor* (give back the forest, take away the city) – that starts the environmental movement proper. Raja Rao's famous novel *Kanthapura* may be viewed as an ecocentric text in which Goddess Kenchamma (a mountain) and the surrounding river have been shown to be healer and keeper of human beings. R. K. Narayan's 'Malgudi' is imbued with the spirit of the place. In Anita Desai's novels concern for feminine sensibility has been made identical with concern for nature. In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* complex issues of conservation and preservation has been introduced provoking the debate over the negotiation of human 'space' and the animal 'space'. However, it was Ruskin Bond who displayed acute and scientific awareness about nature and natural phenomenon. The Mussoorie setting itself is an ecologically utopic zone with tremendous possibility of man-nature cohabitation. While Dehradun and Mussoorie suggests of nature's healing power, at the sametime we are made aware of the devastations brought about into that sublime setting by bombing, by destroying forests, by indiscriminate use of chemicals and pesticides. He advises man for shunning cruelties towards nature and non-human beings, and appeals for developing a more intimate relationship based on compassion and mutual interdependence. His *Room on the Roof* objectifies the sense of place and belonging; individual subjectivity has been posited in the context of the non-human environment and thereby an imaginary correspondence is developed. His encounter with the Dehradun landscape is similar to that of Goethe's experience of understanding *Odyssey* (as pointed out in Bakhtin):

Now that my mind is stored with images of all these coasts and promontories, gulfs and bays, islands and headlands, rocky cliffs, fields, flower gardens, tended trees, fostered vines, mountains wreathed in clouds, eternally serene plains, and the all-encircling sea with its ever-changing colours and moods, for the first time the *Odyssey* has become a living truth to me. (qtd. in Bandyopadhyay 132)⁴

My present paper attempts to study the eco-consciousness of Ruskin Bond in reference to his "Grandfather's Zoo".

Bond himself stated his affinity towards Peter Pan in *Kensington Gardens*, the wonderland of Alice, the Mowgli Stories, Ballantyne's *Coral Islands* and *Hudson Bay*, Jack London's *White Fang*, the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales* (Bond Intro.). And before beginning his *Book of Nature* he clarified his approach towards nature: "this is not a book of natural history, rather a record of my relationship with the natural world . . . (ibid.). But the consciousness is pervaded through statutory warning:

... when we take it (Nature) too much for granted, or misuse its generosity, it turns against us and unleashes forces that overwhelm us – earthquake, tidal wave, typhoon, flood, drought. But then, Nature settles down again and resumes its generous ways. For it is all about renewal – seasons and weather, sunlight and darkness, the urgency of growth, the fertility of the seed and the egg. (ibid.)

“Grandfather’s Zoo” set in part in Dehra and in part in Lucknow, objectifies man’s attempt of building an eco-friendly ambience at the heart of human society. The surrounding landscape is dominated by pervasive greenness – ‘gardens in front, orchards at the back, and sometimes a bit of wilderness thrown in’ (Bond Prelude to GZ). Then the author confesses about the intense influence of the natural world and the role played by them in the generation of the story itself:

Growing in these surroundings, one was bound to come into close contact with the natural world – the denizens of the banyan and jackfruit trees: birds, butterflies, squirrels, reptiles. And then there were the unusual pets that grandfather brought home from time to time.... (ibid.)

Then we could visualize the trope of ‘greenness’ that the story is embedded in.

At the outset the tale is that of the narrator’s grandfather who had the extraordinary knack for bringing animals and birds and various species from different regions and then allowing them the controlled space in his garden. He had ‘an odd assortment of pets’ (GZ 3); ranging from a python, squirrel, wild mongoose, baby elephant, cassowary bird, owl, tiger-cub, and many more. The tale abounds in small memories, experiences, and stories associated with almost all the pet animals. Simple language and lucid narration evokes a homely atmosphere amid which the pangs of separation become distinct and poignant. And the story ends with a remarkable message: that love and sympathetic approach is essential in the development of an amicable man-animal bonding.

Frederick Turner observes in his essay “Cultivating the American Garden”:

... the word ‘garden’ has come to mean little better than a vegetable patch; its substitutes, ‘yard’ and ‘lawn’ seem explicitly to deny an artistic or decorative intent... our garden... the great mediators between nature and culture: cookery, music and the family. Cookery transforms raw nature into the substance of human communication, routinely and without fuss transubstantiating matter into mind... There is enough room to plant gardens for all citizens of the republic, not just a wealthy aristocracy... for truly heroic alteration of the landscape.

(Fromm & Glotfelty 50-1)

It is clear from the above observations that garden carries with it cultural interference as markedly different from natural wilderness. In a sense grandfather’s private garden too would have become a mere human machination which hampers other species by restricting their participation into the natural flow of energies. But close scrutiny reveals to us the free animal ‘space’ that grandfather’s zoo allows to its inhabitants; and in that it re-invokes the ‘Eden Motif’⁵ which encourages escaping into a realm of wild nature. The juxtaposition of human life side by side with the natural life amid these ‘wildernesses’ (indeed, grandfather’s garden although limits the inhabitant’s space, it does not force them into claustrophobic existence by caging them) opens up a new horizon in man-nature coexistence.

Then there are several attempts when we find intentional and marked attempt of developing kinship with animals and nature herself. ‘A small grey squirrel’ (GZ 3) ‘seemed at first to resent my (the boy narrator) invasion of his privacy’ (ibid.) and other members of the species discouraged him ‘in trusting a human’ (ibid.) but after sometime the squirrel tries to build his nest in the narrator’s pocket which adds new dimension to man’s approach to nature. After that grandfather’s preference for the wild mongoose than ‘a

domesticated one’ (8) [‘he had never tried taming it’ (ibid.)] speaks of his sympathetic approach to natural agents. Again grandfather picks up the displaced owlet and nursed it with ‘a meal of raw meat and water’ (13). Although he took part in a hunting expedition he saved the tiger cub unhurt. All these efforts on part of human beings may convert all ‘considerable distrust’ (20) in man-nature relationship and thus make earth nature’s ‘paradise’ [‘squirrel’s paradise’ (17)].

We cannot simply dismiss Grandfather as an imaginative, romantic nature lover for the story incorporates within its body some minute, acute and scientific observations on natural phenomenon which in turn informs us about the food chain, energy transfer, struggle for survival, biological habits of some of the animals, the process of reproduction in nature and the undeviating law of nature which encourages violence in order to derive vitality (this observation is more poignantly true in respect to Ted Hughes’s poetry). Throughout the tale reality of life in nature has been presented; with the change of seasons the biodiversity of the garden enriches:

In the spring, when the banyan tree was full of small red figs, birds of all kinds would flock into its branches, the red-bottomed bulbul, cheerful and greedy; gossiping rosy-pastors; and parrots and crows, squabbling with each other all the time. During the fig season, the banyan tree was the noisiest place on the road. (4)

Then the realistic depiction of the fight between the cobra and the mongoose trying to finish each other off, and the crow dying in the process place us before a raw, elemental world where survival is the utmost concern for all. Again the process of hybridization of species is suggested through white baby squirrels of which ‘the rat must be the father. Rats and squirrels were related to each other... (9). In the process of adaptation and development different species have accommodated themselves in different atmosphere and different weather zones which is what is suggested in reference to the baby elephant and the cassowary bird. The narrator observes – “India is where elephants belong... But the cassowary bird was different... and seemed to do quite well in the sub-tropical climate” (10). Grandfather, however, didn’t force them to ‘co-exist for very long’ (12). The keen interest in documenting the habits and behavioural patterns of the owls also make the text bio-centric: “The owlet is not normally afraid of man nor is it strictly a night bird. But it prefers to stay at home during the day” (13); then again –

During the day they dozed on a hatstand... their nightly occupation was catching beetles... with their razor-sharp eyes and powerful beaks, they were excellent pest- destroyer. (15)

The reference to the pythons also point out important features of the species: ‘pythons don’t chew, they swallow’ (18); and grandfather’s friendly approach may serve to dilute the mistrust of all people who are ‘terrified of all reptiles’ (20). The mention of the ‘hunting expedition in the Terai jungle’ and the consideration of the hunted animal as ‘any game, dead or alive’ (23) would have placed the text traditionally in the line of man’s apathetic approach to nature. But grandfather’s humane and careful approach revives the scenario.

The contact between man and nature has most often been shown to get intensified through man’s effusion and organic excursion into deep forest or mountain top. In one of Bond’s tale Rusty experiences such widening ennobling effects of nature:

... he had been caught up in the excitement of the colour game, overcome by an exhilaration he had never known... He was exhausted now, but he was happy.

He wanted this to go on for ever, this day of feverish emotion, this life in another world. He did not want to leave the forest; it was safe, its earth soothed him, gathered him in, so that the pain of his body became a pleasure....

(qtd. in Bandyopadhyay 125)

This exhilaration and discovery of nature's healing power was often been explored in Romantic literature connecting the trammelled and tormented human beings with the serenity and calmness of nature. But Bond here develops and adds to that tradition by trying to preach a new doctrine which is evident in the grandfather's approach to the zoo-tiger which he mistook to be his own old pet Timothy: "... the tiger returned to lick his hands ... 'I'm talking to Timothy,' said Grandfather" (27). Despite the bad-tempered creature, despite even the zoo-superintendent's confession that 'I have never been able to touch him' (ibid.), grandfather (and because of his ignorance) through his instinctual love and almost filial affection becomes able to develop rapport even with a ferocious beast and the author is successful in presenting a picture before us of man-beast physical proximity ['The tiger was still licking his arm with increasing relish' (28)] and thus dissolves the categorical demarcation of such binaries as Nature/Culture, Man/Animal, Reason/Instinct etc.

1. Most of the theoretical ideas I got from the volume of P. Barry and the edited volume of Fromm and Glotfelty cited below.
2. This is the tendency to simplify nature by categorizing it under certain species and types. This anthropocentric tendency commits the crime of neglecting the diversity of nature. Garrard clarifies this in the volume cited below.
3. Glotfelty in the introduction to the edited volume defines Ecocriticism and lays down its parameters.
4. Bandyopadhyay in his essay explores Bond's eco-consciousness in respect to *The Room on the Roof*. I took the quotation and the idea from the essay.
5. Terry Gifford in his book *Pastoral* (Gifford, Terry. *Pastoral*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.) treats Ted Hughes's poetry in the light of post-pastoralism, and suggests that 'Eden Motif', that is, care-free escape into ideal natural land may reconnect us to nature.

References

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