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ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE NOVELS OF MANOJ DAS AND RUSKIN BOND: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Environment and society are inter-connected since the beginning of human civilization. The more we take care of our natural surroundings, the better life we can have. From time immemorial poets and writers from India and other countries of the world have glorified natural world as well as human-nature relationship. But modern generation and their developments have probably changed the way, which results in a lot of destruction to our environment. Literary figures like William Wordsworth, John Keats, P B Shelley, Anita Sethi, Nancy Newhall, Henry David Thoreau and many more have described natural world, but in Indian context the place Manoj Das and Ruskin Bond have acquired is beyond all. My present paper aims at highlighting the environmental concern of these two authors with regard to their short stories. Here I have studied Das's novel Cyclones and Bond's The Room on the Roof.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, nature, flora and fauna, concern, environment.

Introduction

There are a number of admirers of nature in India as well as other countries of the world. They love the beautiful view of natural world, their inhabitants, nature-human relationship, nature's help for mankind and all. The word 'Ecocriticism' was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978. But as a movement it appeared in 1960s. The word means, as the internet suggests, is an environmental movement of 1990s to create an awareness and make people take steps against climate change and destruction of natural world. Sutariya (2020) says,

Ecocriticism explores the relationship between the environment and literature. The human being is an element of nature.

Literature and art influence human life. Human life too influences the art and literature. Ecocriticism redefines our relationship with the environment and literature (Sutariya, 125).

Man is incomplete and helpless without environment. We depend upon it for breathing, eating, shelter and everything. No one can ever argue that someone doesn't need nature to live a life. Giving various views on Ecocriticism many scholars and eminent persons have said differently. According to one in earlier times man was considered the sole of everything and nature was less prioritized. In 18th century modernism started to emerge and thus environmentalism was hampered.

In romantic period many literary figures like Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Byron felt divine existence with nature and Nayak (2021) says, "Jacques Rousseau understood that nature was pure and innocent, while modern civilization was corrupt and artificial" (Nayak, 3). She again quotes Goltfelty and writes,

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender consciousness perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of its texts, eco-criticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (Nayak, 5).

Though everyone has different mindset to perceive everything and so is the thing with this concept, but the main purpose is to show how humans are connected with environment and it helps them grow physically, mentally and morally. The comfort and confidence we feel are because of the natural world. Literature cannot be separated from environment and its study is the most important. As per Hutchings's view,

Ecocriticism's basic premises is that literature both reflects and helps to shape human responses to the natural environment. By studying the representation of the physical world in literary texts and in the social contexts of their production, ecocriticism attempts to account for attitudes and practices that have contributed to modern-day ecological problems, while at the same time investing alternative modes of thought and behaviour, including sustainable practices that would respect the perceived rights or values associated with non-human creatures and ecological process.

Manoj Das (1934-2021), a bilingual writer from coastal Odisha has bound the readers of every age by his lucrative words, enchanting views, engaging themes and relatable characters. He has written in both Odia and English language, but the interesting part is he has never translated any of his works from

Odia to English or vice versa. He has given them the original touch. Most of his writings are related to provinces in Odisha, its culture, tradition, superstition and so on. Likewise, Ruskin Bond (1934-) belongs to the northern part of India. Though his origin is British, yet he is Indian in and out. As he himself says that he loves every bit of India. Being brought up amidst the scenic beauty of mountains, jungle and rivers of Northern India, he has understood the natural world perfectly. Like all the above-mentioned authors and researchers both Manoj Das and Ruskin Bond have found their ways to express their love as well as concern for the natural environment, its habitants and the relation between them. Although many of their works suggest this theme, their novels have special approach to this. The novel *The Room on the Roof* by Ruskin Bond and *Cyclones* by Manoj Das give us new light to understand this movement and theory quite better. While Bond's novel shows nature's influence over man and how human is controlled yet comforted by natural surroundings, Das's novel suggests emotional connection between mother nature and human beings.

Literature Review:

Bandyopadhyay (2011) in his book discusses Bond's view and his sense of self. He highlights Bond's personal life, his memory of his father, his bitter experience of childhood after his parents' separation and his mother's second marriage. Bandyopadhyay describes how the British origin Bond became an Anglo-Indian and so on. His worst experience of early life is expressed.

Shaw (2008) in her book presents Bond's treatment of love quite authentically. Then she takes *The Room on the Roof*, *Arms and the Man*, *My First Love* and so on for discussion. There is a genuineness and authenticity in his expression of love as it is in *My First Love* Next Shaw compares Bond's concept of love with that of Coleridge. Then she talks of Bond's characters, especially his adolescent characters.

Kumar (2015) in his article throws light on various aspects of Ruskin Bond's works, especially *The Room on the Roof*. The different themes highlighted here are separation, question of identity,

relationships, home, tranquillity and life journey. His stories are generally based on his personal experiences of everyday life. As his characters are simple common people.

Hegishite (2013) in her article presents Manoj Das's immense love for rural culture as an early inhabitant of coastal village Shankhari in Odisha. Being a man from the rural coastal belt of Odisha, Manoj Das's memory and emotions are deeply rooted in the cultures and lives of common man. He has the impression how the city life sometimes can be too harsh on the innocent folks and that he has portrayed in this article.

Two Novels:

The novel *The Room on the Roof* by Bond displays the life of Rusty, an orphan and is the protagonist of the book. Rusty is all alone after his parent's death, even though he lives with his uncle John Harrison. Being lonely he goes through so much; he is confused, helpless and unhappy. He is bound to obey his uncle because he has given him a shelter, he is confused about his future and he wants to elope, but is afraid. He knows if he is caught, he will be canned brutally. Through the character of Rusty's uncle John Harrison, Bond tries to portray English men who don't like Indians and look down upon them. They consider them inferior and untouchable. So, he never lets Rusty meet the people of the locality and make friends. Without any friend and dear one Rusty feels left out and helpless. However, one day, following his heart Rusty leaves his uncle's house and stays at Somi's house. The pain and terror he had under-gone at his guardian's house can be marked in the following lines, "Rusty had never slept well in his guardian's house, ... But in Somi's house he felt safe and a little happy, and slept" (Bond, 39). Somi is an Indian boy, who befriends Rusty and gives him hope and support. Later Rusty becomes an English tutor to Kishen and in exchange gets a room and food. He becomes a part of Kishen's family and the story continues with some more life events of the protagonist.

Das's novel *Cyclones* is set in a rustic place named Kusumpur. From the surface it seems an exact reflection of rural India. The protagonist Sandip, an heir of Zamindars, his life, the ongoing

battle of independence, colonial government, government's wish and effort to transform the village into a town and finally the devastating effects of the cyclone on that village are all shown in this single masterpiece. Firstly, the writer gives an attractive view of spring over Kusumpur, but soon it is faded with the appearance of machines and contractor coming for construction work and all the villagers are depressed. There appears the character of Rajni, who has spent some time in town working there. He came up drunk and it stunned everyone. The difference of thought among the villagers is seen there. While elders think it as the beginning of degeneration, the youngsters thought it was the eve of new development. The storyline of the novel glides like this.

Ecocritical Aspects in the Novels:

If we see Bond's own life, his life like that of Rusty was not so happy. His parents got separated and soon his father left the world. He became all alone and soon he found solace and a companion within the natural world of Shimla, Mussoorie, Dehra and Himalayan valleys. All these are reflected in the novel by showing the character journey of Rusty. The opening scene of the novel explains a natural landscape of spring. Its minute details prove Bond's liking for environment and admiration for scenic beauty. "The light spring rain rode on the wind, into the trees, down the road; it brought an exhilarating freshness to the air, a smell of earth, a scent of flowers; it brought a smile to the eyes of the boy on the road" (Bond, 3). He says about the long road, hills, mountains, jungles, valley and everything of Dehra. Rusty feels free and at ease on the open roads. There is no one to resist him from doing things, no one to put barriers in the name of caste, religion and race. He is roaming with Somi with all freedom like his bosom friend. He likes the rain and to get drenched in it. Later when he takes shelter in Kapoor house, the beauty of a mere banyan tree also enchants him. He feels happy to see a tree with many branches and becoming a house for a number of creatures. That sunset and that view took him to his imagination of Meena, Kishen and Somi.

The afternoon was warm, and Rusty sat beneath the big banyan tree that grew

behind the house, a tree that was almost a house in itself; its spreading branches drooped to the ground and took new root, forming a maze of pillared passages. The tree sheltered scores of birds and squirrels. A squirrel stood in front of Rusty... Rusty leant back against the broad trunk of the banyan, and listened to the lazy drone of the bees, the squeaking of the squirrels and the incessant bird talk (Bond, 55-56).

There is beauty in every season and every portion of nature and Rusty can feel it. When he experiences the first sunrise at his new room on the roof, he feels as if the rays of the sun are reaching up to him to wake him up. With the coming of summer, there would be plenty of mangoes and litchees. During the Holi festival, he feels lively and during rainy season, he feels like washing away the marks of beating with cane by his guardian. When there comes a storm after Meena's death, he feels horrified and broken. Nature has every form and situation in accordance with his emotions and feelings. The environment of India is so fascinating for Bond that he enjoys its hills, mountains, rivers, forests, streams and what not. The natural ambience captivates him and he makes it his companion for life. It has no luxury, no wealth, no modernity, no development, yet both Bond and Rusty feel comfortable in the lap of nature. In this regard Mukalel can be mentioned. He has aptly quoted Bond, "I belong, very firmly, to peepal trees and mango grooves; to sleepy little towns all over India, to hot sunshine, muddy canals, the pungent scent of marigold, the hills of home, spicy odours, wet earth after summer rain, neem pods bursting; laughing brown faces, and the intimacy of human contact" (Mukalel, 5). Being an ecocritical person doesn't portray Bond as a misanthropist. He loves India and its people. But the amount of love and concern he has for the environment is beyond everything else. Sometimes he shows how the non-human creatures are exploited, how birds and animals are killed for mere entertainment, how trees are cut in the name of industrialisation and sometimes he presents how helpful as well as ferocious mother nature can become. In fact, he tries to warn the readers of the consequences of the wrong deeds of human civilization. As Abrams puts

it, "Ecocriticism or environmental criticism designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and biological and physical environment, conducted with as an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities" (Abrams, 71).

Manoj Das is of no exception in this regard. Most of his works focus on the provinces on Odisha, their custom, tradition, culture, people, language and so on. But along with that he never fails to create a sense of consciousness among his readers through his characters, storyline and presentation of location. He is a true son of soil and no doubt an appreciator of nature. Sometimes he glorifies nature as in "The Tree", sometimes he shows brutality of humans over birds and animals as it is in "The Birds" and sometimes he creates awareness regarding the destruction caused to natural resources in the name of modernisation as he has done in "The Submerged Valley". But his novel *Cyclones* have everything in it. The fury of nature is obvious after ruthless behaviour of mankind. With the purpose to make the village a blooming town, the colonial government wants to fill up the river flown by. In the name of development, they want to ruin the environment and no villager of Kusumpur is in support of this. Jena (2022) puts it in this way, "The novel offers an in-depth study of a hero's disillusionment with British temperament, the Eurocentric imperialism for destroying the natural wealth under the sheath of urbanisation. The novel can be treated as a metaphor of violence against nature" (Jena, 69). People in rurality are always too connected with the natural entities like trees, rivers, land, soil and they feel the presence of heavenly body in them. So do the villagers of Kusumpur and they admire river Kheya very much. They are afraid of losing the river and Das writes it like this, "It should suffice to impress upon them the horror of their having to lose their beloved Kheya, the companion that had never failed them through the ages, a river that had never troubled them, even with a mild flood" (Das, 218). The colonial government wanted to make a port there, which put the environment of the village at risk. The villagers felt ominous signs in the hooting of owl and cawing of crow. The river was about to die, ultimately the

forest and its inhabitants would die. Das is too concerned for the natural world and he wants to put before his readers the necessity to create ecocritical consciousness.

Conclusion

Both Das and Bond have lived their lives and grown up amidst natural atmosphere of different provinces of India. Though they are very much influenced by India as a whole, yet he most common thing that has drawn their attention is the destructive activities of men towards nature and forced them to use their pens. Both of them dive deep into any place's surroundings, its people, economy, culture, politics, people and everything else. But they have eyed the most at nature and environment. Like William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelley, John Keats, Kamala Markandaya, R.K. Narayan and many more they have prioritized nature the most.

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