

Environmental Literacy and Ruskin Bond's Stories

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Abstract

As every year of the 21st century passes, the world observes serious implications of manhandling of nature and the fear of extinction catches our hearts. Environmental literacy among the mankind is the only way to survive. For that, inculcation of environmental values in human beings is of utmost importance. This can be achieved by making nature stories a part of the school curriculum and putting a reading habit in children. Ruskin Bond is a pro in this kind of writing as nature is in his 'blood'. His stories excellently inculcate the love of nature among the readers which in turn will save the earth.

KEYWORDS: Environmental Literacy, Nature conservation, Ruskin Bond, Children's stories, nature stories

In this era of modern technology and science, a 'simple' and 'cruel' virus – COVID 19 has eclipsed the human existence in such a way that nothing works to defeat it. It, perhaps, at the time of victory, reminds humans that they are not the conquerors. Human race behaves as if it knows no boundaries to its success and a simple attack at such times brings it back to the earth.

Human beings must realize that they are a part of the nature, not vice versa. They can't exist without nature and nothing will be lost in nature if human beings vanish from the face of the earth. Rather the other species will live peacefully and safely without human beings. These words may seem harsh and cruel even, but they are true nonetheless. Human beings must understand that they are only a member of the life on earth and not the master. Considering themselves more valuable than other creatures has created this problem. They have exploited and destroyed the nature so fast that in less than 50 years this earth will be a desert and only human beings will be at blame. Until now, earth is the only place where there is life, so humans have no alternative or escape. It is high time they understand that, learn lessons, take efforts to conserve nature. From this fact the concept of environmental literacy has emerged.

Oregon Environmental Literacy Program defines Environmental literacy as 'An individual's understanding, skills and motivation to make responsible decisions that considers his or her relationships to natural systems, communities and future generation.'

One has to understand that this movement is not just theoretical; it needs proactive actions on everybody's part as the human race has been entrusted with this earth for the future generations. There can be various ways to achieve Environmental Literacy among the citizens of the world by way of activities like tree plantations, excursions in nature, refuse-reduce-reuse-recycle policy in everything we use, awareness programmes, film shows, lectures, etc.

It is an observed fact that whatever value we want to inculcate in the members of a society or make them accept the change, it goes in three steps. The first generation accepts it as a compulsion and learns it for the fear of the penal actions. The second generation follows it as it has witnessed the problems faced by the earlier generations due to not observing the rules and so it reacts by following it. And the third generation accepts it as a value to be inculcated for itself. It means if we wish to inculcate environmental values in the society, it needs three generations to accept these values. Unfortunately, we don't have that much time. We need to accelerate the speed of accepting the value. A very effective and necessary way of doing it is to educate children by putting the awareness and conservation strategies in their syllabi. Unfortunately, children never like any subject which is a part of their syllabi.

There is another and more effective way of inculcating environmental values and awareness for conservation in the children is to write stories, dramas, one act plays etc. for them so that they read it, enjoy it and make it a part of their constitution as a human being. There are a few writers worldwide, who do this through their literature. India is fortunate to possess to such a writer - Ruskin Bond. Ruskin Bond is a prolific writer who has penned stories, novels, travelogues, autobiographical writing, character sketches, poems etc. At the age of 86 his pen has not taken a rest in his long career of 68 years. Most of his literature emphasizes nature conservation and his children stories are the best examples of it. He chooses such characters and plots and writes in simple, beautiful and soulful way that his stories leave indelible effect on the minds of readers, both young and adults.

By and large Indian English literature is urban centered as most of the writers are expatriates or teachers. They come from urban background, or are engrossed in complexities of metropolitan setup and many of them are writers of Indian Diaspora writing about their Indianness. The famous Indian English writer decorated with Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, Ruskin Bond, however, is an exception to this. Though born of British parents in the British Raj, he always thought India with its 'heat and dust', the Himalayan breeze, and 'the human contact' to be his home.

Ruskin speaks of his deep association with the mountains by saying 'Mountains are in my blood'. His write up 'The Roads to Anjani Sain' raises the sensitive issue of defaced mountains. Bond is not anti-development. He admits that roads are necessary to access the remote parts in the hills and to provide medical aid and postal services. But he shows resentment to the way they are marching ahead violating the mountain ethics and massacring the nature in the name of development. He is sick of blooming clutter of tourism. He has experienced how badly it has made normal life difficult in the hill stations. Thoughtless rise of tourism is a threat.

The Grandfather in Bond's stories introduces the by protagonist to the world of nature, flora and fauna. He is a friend, guide and companion to the young boy. "We must acknowledge their rights on the earth;" said Grandfather, "everywhere, birds and animals are finding it more difficult to lie because we are destroying their forests. They have to keep moving as the trees disappear." (151) His story 'An Island of Trees' instills the value of love for nature, planting of considering trees as important as trees. Koki, a little girl and he grandmother have a heart to heart talk and grandma tells Koki about her

grandpa. Koki's great-grandpa, who served in Indian Forest Service, was a lover of trees, knew almost everything about them and understood them. When in service he tried to save the diversity of jungle. When retired, he created a jungle all by himself planting on an island which had become a small dense. He opines that 'we are not planting it (forest) for people to see...We are planting it for the earth – and for the birds and animals who live on it and need more food and shelter' (54)

Grandma tells Koki, 'Father told me why mankind and not only wild creature need trees – for keeping the desert away, for attracting rain, for preventing the banks of rivers from being washed away. But everywhere people are cutting down trees without planting new ones. If this continues, then one day there will no forests at all and the world will become one great desert!' (55)

His another story 'The Cherry Tree' gives the beautiful relation between Rakesh, a young boy and his grandfather who sows the seed of love for trees, satisfaction in the company of nature and the sense of belongingness in the young mind of Rakesh. It's a simple story narrating how Rakesh eats some cherries and sows one of the seeds in his garden, how the sapling grows, how it manages to live even after getting eaten by a goat and cutting accidentally by a woman and within 3-4 years yields cherries. This small act gives Rakesh the sense of belonging and joy of creation. He exclaims, "This is how it feels to be God!" This story can easily inculcate the value of love for nature among the children and adults.

'The School among the Pines' is about the struggles of a Garhwal child for education, the difficulties she has to face but it also about how we have to adjust with the nature, how all creatures great and small have to co-exist and how development is harming nature as well as the human society and how we should make it a point to compensate the collateral damage development brings about.

'Romi and the Wildfire' is a story about the wildfire and a boy, Romi, caught in it. It makes the readers aware of the carelessness of the people while throwing burning matchsticks which the jungles and its creatures have to pay for. Romi observes the wildfire and its menace on the life the wildlife as an insider and understands its horror. He also understands how the wild creatures from a small hare to the big elephants lose their home and it may harm the villages around.

The story 'Tiger my Friend' focuses on the extinction of tigers, deforestation, tigers turning into cattle eaters, hatred of human beings for cattle eater or man eater tigers. Only a child understands that humans are encroaching forests and the tigers kill humans or cattle due to hunger. It questions 'Can there be India without tigers?' and feels happy when understands that the tiger is safe.

'Goodbye, Miss Mackenzie' is another story about a friendship between an old lady and a school-going boy. Miss Mackenzie is a British nature lover spinster who has chosen to stay back in India instead of going back to England. She is a keen student of the flora of the Himlayas and possesses rare copy of an important reference book on the flora. But when she meets Anil, the boy who is keen on the study of flowers, plants of the region, she chooses to pass on her knowledge to the boy. At the end, feels that she might

not be alive next summer, presents the book to Anil and passes the tradition of love for nature to the next generation. Along with passing on the tradition, this story emphasizes the role of adults in nurturing and shaping the minds of the young ones.

‘Dragon in the Tunnel’ is a story of a young boy and a station watchman saving a leopard from being run over by a train in a tunnel by shouting loudly to frighten the leopard and make it run away to the forest. The khalasi i.e. the station watchman is sure that the leopard will not harm him and the boy. This coexisting and caring for each other that we human beings need to learn. They must know that there is no other way to live on this earth.

Bond is different from other writers as he wants his readers to realize that animals also have souls like human beings and have right to live on this earth. Through his animal stories he tries to make the readers eco-sensitive, and make them feel that man and animal, both are the integral part of nature and depend on each other. He doesn’t write animal fantasies but depicts them in either their natural environment or as pet animals. Ruskin’s stories of pet animals need separate discussion. But whichever stories one analyses, in his efforts, Bond is close to a naturalist. He not only records Himalayan fauna but also raises deep concern for their preservation. He renders a vivid account of their life, the threats they face, and their role in maintaining the chain of existence. They are portrayed endowed with basic human instincts of apprehension, love and care without submitting their animal self. It is neither personification nor moralization of fables. Bond simply visualizes their activities in terms of human emotions. This quality of his writing makes him different from other nature writers. For him, ‘all creatures great and small’ are of same value in nature. None of them is of more or less importance. A single flower of some insignificant plant is as beautiful as some rare species or even a tiger or elephant. This outlook in his stories and memoirs are so endearing that the reader forgets that he is being changed into a nature lover. If anyone can do this simply through his literature effortlessly, it is Ruskin Bond !!

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