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Understanding Ruskin Bond's *Book of Nature*: An Ecosystem Approach*

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Abstract

Nature writing is emerging as a promising field as its scope and range are expanding. Beginning as solitary enjoyment of wilderness to the anthropocentric view of nature, it has come a long way. The rich existing body of nature writing has explored many generic forms -- memoir, travelogue, natural history and literary essay, not to mention bibliographies, endnotes, glossaries, and maps. The present paper analyses the nature of nature writing in Ruskin Bond's Book of Nature using an ecosystem approach. It contends that Bond's writing is free from the confines of genre and assumes as varied shapes as the nature does. It narrates, documents, contemplates, reminisces, breaks into poetry, moves as a travelogue, philosophises on various aspects of nature. It is hybrid in nature and contains some bit of every genre thus simulating the unplanned nature. Citing limitations of the existing taxonomy, the paper attempts to place Bond's The Book of Nature using Barnhill's approach. It tries to locate his work vis a vis the fresh ways of looking at the landscape. It is a theoretical take on his work focussing on the structure and subject of his work and its significance in achieving the desired effect.

Keywords: nature writing, genre, taxonomy, ecosystem, Ruskin Bond, landscape,

Nature Writing and Taxonomy

The term nature writing is fluid and yet to assume a definite meaning. Richard Nordquist defines nature writing as a “form of creative nonfiction in which the natural environment (or a narrator's encounter with the natural environment) serves as the dominant subject.” He adds that nature writing is a historically recent literary genre, and one of the most revolutionary in assimilating a variety of writings. “It's like a woodland stream that sometimes runs out of sight, buried in sand, but overflows into waterfalls farther downstream. It can be easy to ignore, but it keeps eroding the bedrock” (Wallace). Nature writing has got permanently associated with the essays such as “Walden,” though there is plethora of earth-centric fiction, poetry, nature reporting and drama available, he argues.

As nature writing arises at the confluence of arts and sciences, it problematises both disciplinary and generic boundaries. Critics have been confused about the generic identity of nature writing. Centrally concerned with the relationships between self and place, natural and cultural processes, the texts labelled as “nature writing” typically draw upon the resources of several distinct genres of writing to compose formally hybrid narratives. These texts are flexible enough to take the form of a travelogue, a memoir, a farm journal, hard science or metaphysical experience. Jason Cowley in his essay “The New Nature Writing” calls it an experiment in forms. He observes that new nature writing is concerned with generating “new ways of seeing” (11) through its attention to the local and the ordinary, aspiring “to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect” (9). The same idea has been expressed by Neal Alexander in his “Theologies of the Wild” who says that works professedly nature writing are known to blend generic types.

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Thomas J. Lyon has outlined a detailed generic taxonomy of nature writing in his introduction to *This Incomparable Land*. Taxonomy is the classification of literature that helps name, locate and classify a text into a certain type. Lyon in his essay "A Taxonomy of Nature Writing" points out three dimensions of nature writing – natural history information, personal responses to nature and philosophical interpretation of nature" (3). He lays down a range of diverse forms of nature writing including – field guides and professional papers, natural history essays, rambles, essays on experiences in nature having three sub-types, solitude and back-country living, travel, adventure and farm life, and lastly man's role in Nature.

Another broader category "nature-oriented" literature coined by Patrick D. Murphy expands Lyon's taxonomy. It adds to Lyon's spectrum by creating a distinction between nature writing and nature literature that also includes fiction and poetry. Apart from that, he suggests another category "environmental writing" which is centred around an authorial self-consciousness about environmental issues and challenges. Neal Alexander and Jason Cowley have adopted and elaborated the term "landscape writing." Accordingly, landscape writing refers less to "actual pictorial representation than to a particular way of seeing expressed therein" (Alexander 4). Alexander is primarily concerned with literary representations of space and place.

Ecosystem Approach

David Landis Barnhill offers a new way of approaching nature writing for mapping the range and diversity of the genre that he terms as the ecosystem approach. Though the earlier taxonomies of nature writing outlined by Thomas J. Lyon and Patrick D. Murphy have proved to be useful in the analysis of "nature-oriented" literature, Barnhill points out the exclusion of nature poetry and fiction in Lyon's taxonomy. He devises a more inclusive approach called Ecosystem approach to address the difficulties of analysis. In this approach, each piece of nature writing is an ecosystem in which various elements of nature writing are developed and synchronised in a unique way. "The abstract categories into which works of nature are placed in a taxonomy (natural history information, personal response to nature, environmental critique, etc.) become multiple elements within individual works. Each work is, then, a differentiated but integrated ecosystem of various elements" (Barnhill 279). This approach promises to capture the internal diversity of the individual text. He lists ten major elements in any work of nature writing. A text may contain some or all of them. The approach includes 1. Descriptions of nature 2. Personal Experience of nature 3. Social experience of nature 4. Philosophy of nature 5. Ecological consciousness 6. Philosophy of language 7. Philosophy of the human 8. Ecosocial politics 9. Praxis and policies 10. Spirituality. It is a holistic approach that equips the reader with a vocabulary to analyse works identified as nature writing. It enables critics to compare individual texts and to connect separate elements within a text.

Ruskin Bond and *The Book of Nature*

Ruskin Bond is an Anglo-Indian writer based in Uttarakhand in India. He has been writing since the age of seventeen. Bond chose to stay in the small hill town of Landour which remains the fountainhead of most of his narratives. Garhwal mountains appear ubiquitously in the firmament of his narratives. Bond never leaves the hillside literally and metaphorically. He has reproduced with great ease and grace his daily encounters with nature which make for a delightful read as well as provide information about the fragile ecosystem of the Himalayas. He experiences the whole gamut of emotions through the agency of nature as the objects of nature in his stories have the power to inspire, excite, comfort, heal, warn and punish. He appears as the great priest of beauty like Keats, pantheist like Wordsworth, solitary creature like Thoreau, mystic like Walt Whitman and Rabindranath Tagore. It is his lucid and lyrical narrative style that makes him stand out among his contemporaries. Though his stories are considered to be his chief contribution, yet he has exploited literary essay as a means to explore

the porous margins between culture and nature, human and non-human worlds. Essay is a convenient tool due to its exploratory and “anti-systematic” mode of enquiry. This paper would exclusively focus on the collection of his personal essays *The Book of Nature*. Each chapter begins with an introduction from the author, initiating and beckoning the reader to partake of a distinct aspect of nature.

Descriptions of Nature

The Book of Nature is a wonderful account of nature’s marvels. The reader embarks on a journey of the Himalayan region navigating its forests, peaks, waterfalls, watching its seasons, flora and fauna, his sense perceptions inundated with the sights, smells and calls of the wild. Bond does not traverse continents but using his keen eye and offering depth of experience focuses on the natural beauty strewn around his cottage. Talking about the call of the Himalayan whistling thrush, he says,

“It is a song that never fails to enchant me. The bird starts with a hesitant whistle, as though trying out the tune; then, confident of the melody, it bursts into full song, a crescendo of sweet notes and variations ringing clearly across the hillside. Suddenly the song breaks off, right in the middle of a cadenza, and I am left wondering what happened to make the bird stop” (193).

The contents cover all aspects of the landscape including his home, surroundings, his rambles, adventures, natural phenomena, wildlife, vegetation and not co-incidentally conclude at nature’s fury. His descriptions can be relished without digging for any higher symbolic meaning. Using various painterly techniques and modes of description, he offers a feast to the senses. The descriptions are embedded in a narrative, as personal essays or a diary kept by Bond or as scientific explanation of various species and phenomena.

Several varieties of balsam, or *impatiens*, flourish between seven and nine thousand feet. The term *impatiens* refers to the hasty escape of the seed when the pod is touched. When fully ripe, the pod explodes at the slightest touch. Frank Smythe, in his *Valley of Flowers* (1930), describes masses of balsam growing as tall as eight feet in the Bhyunder valley and adjoining areas of the Garhwal Himalayas (Bond 101).

Ruskin Bond uses various generic forms to describe nature including narrative storytelling, adventure accounts, scientific explanations and even poetic passages. One of his flower haikus reads as

“There is a begonia in her cheeks
Pink as the flush of early dawn
On Sikkim’s peaks.” (169)

Bond’s body of work primarily consists of narratives of the self, stories heard from his grandfather or the village folk. They agree with the view of ecocritic Scott Slovic who says that “ecocritics should tell stories, should use narrative as a constant or intermittent strategy for literary analysis.” The purpose is not to compete with the literature itself, but simply to illuminate and appreciate the context of reading. He admonishes against reducing our scholarship to an arid, hyper-intellectual game, devoid of smells and tastes.

Socio-cultural Experience of Nature

All the elements of nature-oriented literature are so integrated in *The Book of Nature* that there is an organic movement from one element to another. Bond owes his love of nature to his extended family. Bond’s grandfather served in the Indian Forest Services and was posted at Dehradun. Bond’s childhood was spent at his grandparents’ home in Dehradun which resulted in his natural affinity with trees and animals. The first chapter “Grandfather’s Zoo” ushers the reader into the Dehra home of author’s grandparents that housed an odd assortment of pets including a monkey, a baby elephant, a cassowary bird, a spotted owlet and above all a tiger cub named Timothy. Their antics, infighting, the grandmother’s protests make for the most hilarious and amusing part of the narrative. It also implies that Bond inherits his love for the

wild from his family. Though Bond has led more or less a solitary life, the text is replete with accounts of his boyhood adventures with his friends. His friends Anil, Somi, Sunil accompanied him on jungle trails, dives in the pools and trekking on glaciers. Bond quotes narratives, legends, anecdotes to expound the socio-cultural significance of certain trees, rivers, places.

Bond's idea of home is inclusive consisting of trees, birds and animals. As a child he used to spend a lot of time sitting in the banyan tree at his grandparents' home. Bond's nature writing is anchored to his Landour home and his descriptions encapsulate religious and cultural significance of certain trees, flowers and phenomena. Allison B. Wallace recognises encounters with nature as eco-literature only in the daily contexts. According to her, nature writing is, "Writing that examines and invites intimate human experience of a place's myriad ingredients: weather, climate, flora, fauna, soil, air, water, rocks, minerals, fire and ice, as well as all the marks there of human history."

Personal experience of Nature Writing

Bond derives his love for nature from his grandfather and father. Both used to take young Rusty on the trail of nature, the memories of which became an integral part of his persona. Most descriptions of nature are derived from nostalgia, Bond's boyhood adventures and his minute observations as a grown up. Franzen is of the view that nature writing must replicate the intensity of a personal relationship. "Narrative nature writing, at its most effective, places a person (often the author, writing in first person) in some kind of unresolved relationship with the natural world, provides the character with unanswered questions or an unattained goal, and then deploys universally shared emotions—hope, anger, longing, frustration, embarrassment, disappointment—to engage a reader in the journey" (Franzen). As Bond dwells on his own experiences and memories for his essays, he invariably makes use of the first person in his narratives.

Barry Lopez in his essay "A Literature of Place" holds that nature writing must have "these three qualities--paying intimate attention; a storied relationship to a place rather than a solely sensory awareness of it; and living in some sort of ethical unity with a place--as a fundamental human defence against loneliness." Bond's stories of nature talk of limited human contact allowed by the author because observing nature is a solitary enterprise. "Narratives of retreat - or more colourfully, dramas of solitude -- relate a writer's movement away from human society toward a state of solitude in nature (Roorda 405)." From a small insect to a huge mountain the author spends a lot of time observing nature and comes out with witty and insightful commentary while connecting with his unique self. "A bush may spread sideways or gain in substance, but it seldom towers over you. This means that I can be on intimate terms with it, know its qualities of leaf, bud, flower, and fruit—and also its inhabitants, be they insects, birds, small mammals, or reptiles (*The Book of Nature* 42).

Jacqueline Johnson Cason holds that the best nature writing is about "the dramatization of one writer's encounter with his or her own empirical perceptions of the natural world, the dynamic interaction of self and science" (Cason 12). Bond confesses, "My greatest pleasure lies in taking path – any old path will do – and following it until it leads me to a forest glade or village or stream or windy hilltop. This sort of tramping (it does not even qualify as trekking) is a compulsive thing with me" (*The Book of Nature* 85). Paths fascinate most of the nature writers because they establish connections between places, people and landscapes.

Philosophy of Nature

Mountains continue to fascinate Bond and he often philosophises over them. He believes in the healing/ transformative power of hills. Living for many years in Maplewood Cottage, at 7000 feet in Garhwal Himalayas, he admits that the surrounding trees gave him peace, security, the company of birds and a variety of fruits for free.

But in the hills, there is always something new waiting for you around the next bend. For at every bend the entire vista is altered, and our perspective changes too. When we walk close to nature, we come to a better understanding of life; for it is from the natural world that we first emerged and to which we still belong (Bond 60).

Nature is the common thread that runs through all of his work, appearing as a constant presence and not just as the backdrop of his stories. That is why it is rewarding to study his bond with nature and look into the contemplative nature and interdisciplinarity of his prose. However, Bond prefers to call himself a nature lover. "It is so easy for the flower enthusiast to blunder when it comes to distinguishing types and families of flowers. Botanists have certainly done their best to confuse the nature lover. But we should not allow ourselves to be discouraged; we have as much right to the enjoyment of flowers as they" (157).

He believes that the people who live on these mountain slopes, in the mist-filled valleys of Garhwal, have long since learned humility, patience and a quiet reserve. Bond's views are reinforced by Robert Macfarlane in his *Mountains of the Mind* that "mountainous landscapes provide a unique arena in which to test the "concepts of selfhood and self-knowledge" (85). Bond can find deep correspondences between self and landscape, so altitude is equated with both spiritual and moral elevation. Bond doesn't aggrandize or mythologize his relationship to nature and the non-human, but attributes significance, humour, mystification or romantic illusions to his immediate landscape. His prose is interspersed with fresh parallels with natural phenomena and objects. He has an amazing knack for personifications.

Eco Consciousness

Bond is sometimes dismissed as a children's writer lacking depth and is not taken seriously by critics. Despite the descriptive and narrative nature of his work, he makes a case for environmental conservation. He exhibits a heightened awareness of environmental degradation in his works. Garhwal Himalayas are under scanner for flash floods and forest fires and his work and warnings are suddenly relevant for the stability of the region. "We know that bushes are ideal for binding the earth together and preventing erosion. In this respect they are just as important as trees. Every monsoon I witness landslides all about me, but I know the hillside above my cottage is well-knit, knotted and netted, by bilberry and raspberry, wild jasmine, dogrose and bramble, and other shrubs, vines and creepers." (42). Bond underlines the importance of shrubs for the prevention of soil erosion quite nonchalantly.

Thomas K. Dean defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. Inherently, then, eco-criticism is interdisciplinary. In order to understand the connectedness of all things--including the life of the mind and the life of the earth--one must reconnect the disciplines that have become fragmented through over-specialization.

In the name of development man plays a mean and wicked game with the creatures and has started invading their homes by cutting mountains and roads. Bond reiterates in almost every story of his about the moral duty of man towards nature and above all his stories inculcate a sense of duty and responsibility towards the nature. (Singh 129)

Ruskin Bond's love for Nature enables him to sense the loss to humanity with environmental degradation. He denounces development at the cost of environment. His works are a clarion

call for the government and people to wake up. He's deeply concerned over deforestation, flash floods, loss of habitat, diminishing number of leopards in Garhwal Himalayas. He observes that animals don't feel threatened by his presence during his walks in the wilderness. "But did the leopard, trusting one man, make the mistake of bestowing it on others? Did I, by casting out all fear – my own fear and the leopard's protective fear – leave him defenceless (76)?" The chapter "Nature's Fury" is especially relevant. Bond says, "Earthquake, tidal wave, hurricane, flood, blizzard, all come to remind us that we are not, after all, the masters of the universe. We might trample upon our natural heritage, and do our best to destroy it, but the forces of nature are greater than man's. Nature will always have the last word" (248).

Conclusion

The Book of Nature is a microcosm representing the entire ecosystem of Garhwal Himalayas. The book follows the rhythm of nature taking note of its seasons, forests, trees, streams, flowers, monsoon, birds, big cats and nature's fury. Bond not only exhibits the first-hand knowledge of the terrain but also humanises it in the process unlike documentary writing. *The Book of Nature* reveals Bond's ability to dwell and extrapolate from the little natural happenings in his surroundings. His engagement with nature and landscape is that of a curious amateur with leisurely contemplative tone. Ruskin Bond's nature writing can be compared to nature itself in *The Book of Nature*. Like a waterfall changing shape as it moves, the book assumes many forms, it breaks into storytelling, dives into memory and brings out gems of an excellent memoir, documents flora and fauna like a scientist, flows like poetry at times, occasionally embarks on the adventure and travel writing. Its contents and form rather forms are strangely complementary. It has got beauty and diversity of nature. It lacks organization but is essentially organic.

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