



Cover Page



ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THREE STORIES FROM DUST ON THE MOUNTAIN BY RUSKIN BOND

Proshanta Sarkar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ghatal R. S. Mahavidyalaya

Abstract

This paper analyzes three short stories – “Untouchable”, “The Coral Tree”, and “Going Home” in the collection of short stories, *Dust on the Mountain* by Ruskin Bond through ecocriticism. The narratives show the intricate interaction between the natural environment and human beings in the Indian context. Ecocriticism as a theory of literature focuses on the treatment of nature, environment and ecological consciousness in literature. Ruskin Bond does not describe nature as a setting but as a part of the life of the characters. The paper compares the way environmental factors determine human experiences, social relationships, and emotional states in these stories. With the help of textual analysis, the paper shows that Ruskin Bond underlines the interdependence between the human and non-human world. Nature in these stories is used as a source of solace, expression of emotional feelings and a testament to the human plight. According to the study, Ruskin Bond proposes the idea of nature as the healing power that goes beyond social divisions and human stand-offs. This ecocritical reading brings out the importance of being ecologically alert to the human condition in the Ruskin Bond stories.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Human-Nature Relationship, Anthropocentrism, Environmental Justice, Seasonal Cycles

Introduction: Ecocriticism and Ruskin Bond

Ecocriticism is an important literary theory that developed at the end of the twentieth century when researchers started analyzing the role of nature and environment in literature. The theory examines the ways in which authors portray the natural world, the way human beings relate with their surrounding and ecological issues manifest in literature. Ecocriticism was defined by Cherylle Glotfelty as the study of the relationship that exists between literature and the physical environment.



Cover Page



Ruskin Bond is also one of the most revered authors of India and his writings are closely intertwined with nature. In his stories, Ruskin Bond frequently uses the Himalayan scenery, rivers and trees, animals, and such elements of nature as the transforming seasons. Ruskin Bond does not give the nature as the inactive surrounding but the active element that shapes human feelings, choice and connections. The anthology, *Dust on the Mountain*, contains stories of sixty years of writing by Ruskin Bond.

The three narratives discussed in this paper show various sides of the relationship between human beings and nature. “Untouchable” is a story that tells of self-discovery of a young boy with a privileged background who is all alone during a storm and goes in search of solace with a sweeper boy who is a member of a socially marginal community. The story, “The Coral Tree” is about the good-bye of a young man who is leaving his home in India to go to elsewhere and his interaction with a little girl who insists on flowers of the coral tree. “Going Home” is a story about a farmer called Daya Ram who loses his fortune, and suffers all sorts of battles on his way home. The natural setting is also a significant part of the story in both works as it contributes to the plot and experience of the characters.

“Untouchable”: Nature as Social Equalizer

“Untouchable” is the story that brings a strong criticism of social stratifications and is brought out by using environmental factors. The narrator is a young boy who is in a very privileged social position and is left alone in a house when it is being violently stormed. It starts with the narration of the heat and dust of the plains:

“The sweeper boy splashed water over the khus matting that hung in the doorway and for a while the air was cooled.” (16)

This opening sentence establishes the importance of natural elements in creating the atmosphere of the story.

The sweeper boy, who belongs to the ‘untouchable’ caste, moves freely in and out of the house, bringing water and cooling the environment:

“At every trip to the water tank he bathed, and returned dripping and glistening from head to toe.” (16)

The water in the story is a manifestation of cleanliness and freshness. As the narrator is so much prone to heat and would only be trapped in his room, the sweeper boy has the luxury of



Cover Page



bathing at the water tank. This irony underlines the social divisions. The boy who is deemed as not good by the society looks fresh and clean, and the boy with privilege is hot and uncomfortable. The water is a natural aspect that questions the social order of cleanliness and dirtiness.

The story introduces nature as democratizing force which is not concerned with human ranks. The night storm becomes the factor of breaking the social barriers. “A thunderclap shattered the brooding stillness.” (18) The lightning and the thunder are enough to put fear in the heart of the narrator and he has to turn to the human company. So when he cannot endure the horror of the storm all alone, he runs to the room of the sweeper boy. “I fled, blundering into the sweeper boy’s room.” (18) The storm as a natural phenomenon makes the narrator go beyond his socialization and biases.

The story defines the rain as a connotation of purification and revitalization. “The scent of the wet earth blew in through the skylight and the rain fell harder.” (19) When the scent of rain on earth is described, it is pleasant, and soothing. The nature of seasons goes on despite societal differences among people. The rain is equal to every human being irrespective of their membership in either the privileged or the marginalized groups.

The centipede incident in the story demonstrates the narrator’s dependence on the sweeper boy and challenges social hierarchies:

“A centipede ran down the wall, across the floor.

I screamed and jumped on the bed, shouting for help.” (17)

The reader learns about a privileged social group through the narrator, and he is so afraid of a tiny insect and demands another person, whom he considers inferior to assist him. The centipede is killed by the sweeper boy without second thoughts:

“He saw me on the bed, the centipede on the floor; and picking a large book off the shelf, slammed it down on the repulsive insect.” (17)

This incident reveals that social privilege does not provide protection from the challenges posed by the natural world.

The ending of the story emphasizes the theme of unity and shared humanity:



Cover Page



“I sat down, my back against the wall; beside the untouchable, the outcaste ... and the thunder and lightning ceased, and the rain came down, swishing and drumming on the corrugated roof.” (18)

The narrator and the sweeper boy are sitting together and they get some solace in each other as the storm nears. The force of nature has broken the social barrier that separated them. The water falling on the roof makes a soft sound that helps them forget their anxieties. The natural world gives a place where human beings are able to relate regardless of the social boundaries.

“The Coral Tree”: Nature as Memory and Connection

The story titled “The Coral Tree” presents nature as a symbol of continuity and connection across time and space. The narrator is a young man who is about to leave India to go to England for work:

“In a short while a tonga would take me to a railway station, and from there a train would take me to Bombay, and then a ship would take me to England.” (20)

The narrator is at a transitional moment in his life, leaving behind his home and moving towards an uncertain future.

The coral tree stands in front of the house of the grandfather of the narrator:

“The coral tree stood in front of the house surrounded by pools of water and broken, fallen blossoms.” (21)

The tree is even said to have scarlet flowers. The tree is a symbol of the relation that the narrator has with his home and his origins. The picture of the tree and the pools of water and falling blossoms implies the beauty and the impermanence.

The act of climbing the tree to pick flowers for the girl becomes a symbolic action:

“The tree was easy to climb, and I made myself comfortable on one of the lower branches, smiling down at the serious upturned face of the girl.” (21)

The action of climbing the tree symbolises a metamorphosis to childhood where it is normal and easy to do. Coral tree gives a physical platform to the relationship of the narrator and the girl and the narrator and his childhood self.

The little girl who arrives to demand flowers of the coral tree is the symbol of naivete and interest in this world:



Cover Page



“She was a small, dark girl, her eyes big and black, her pigtailed tied up in a bright red ribbon; and she was fresh and clean like the rain and the red earth.” (20)

The description of the girl links her to the natural elements. She is likened to rain and red earth that are life giving elements.

Their attitudes toward travelling and home can be seen in the conversation between the narrator and the girl. The girl states that she would like to journey everywhere. “I want to go everywhere, to America and Africa and Japan and Honolulu.” (20) In fact, the narrator is going out of the country, but his emotions are not that simple, they are not excitement:

“I felt a sudden nostalgic longing for childhood and an urge to remain behind in my grandfather’s house with its tangled memories and ghosts of yesteryear.” (21)

The coral tree has literal and symbolic meanings in the act of breaking the branches. He curls a branch, but that is young and green, and he must bend it a number of times before it comes to pass. The fact that the branch is hard to break implies the power and sturdiness of the tree and consequently, the power of connection between the narrator and his house. Deforestation is one of those types of activities that destroy branches of a living tree, although a tree will grow again. This gesture may be regarded as the symbol of suffering of separation and parting.

The coral blossoms that the narrator hands the girl blossom to represent the connection between them. He throws coral blossoms on her head. This jocular act has produced an atmosphere of happiness and splendour. The falling blossoms are fragile and fly by, just as much as the moment of an encounter between the narrator and the girl.

The scene of the departure at the end of the story underlines the idea of loss and impermanence. As she waves the flowers break and dance in the wind. The blossoms of coral the girl is holding in her hands disintegrate, and are blown away by the wind. This photograph gives a feeling of vulnerability of beauty and bondage. The ribbon has unravelled off her pigtail and was lying on the ground with the coral blossoms. The ribbon and the blossoms, the items that symbolised colour and beauty, are abandoned on the ground now.

A close relationship is developed between the girl and the natural world in the last line of the story. and like the rain and the red earth she is fresh and clean. This sentence is the same description of the girl as in the previous line, but it focuses on her connection with the natural world. Both rain and red earth are necessary to life and growth. Comparing the girl to these things, Ruskin Bond implies that she can be the symbol of life, maturing, and continuation.



Cover Page



“Going Home”: Survival in a Harsh Environment

The story titled “Going Home”, brings out another side of human beings and the natural environment. This main character is a farmer Daya Ram that is coming home to Hardwar after travelling there:

“Daya Ram, the farmer, was going home; home to his rice fields, his buffalo and his wife.” (23)

The story establishes from the beginning that Daya Ram is connected to the land through his occupation as a farmer.

The incident on the train that sets the story in motion involves the loss of money through the window:

“Suddenly the boy’s mother, who had been engrossed in conversation with another woman, turned and saw what was happening. She walloped the boy over the head and the suddenness of the blow (it was more of a thump than a slap) made him fall back against the window, and the cloth bag fell from his hand on to the railway embankment outside.” (24)

When he loses his money bag, it is an accident. The cash drops into the natural environment, on the railway embankment. This event causes Daya Ram to get out of the train and start walking back on the railway line in search of his money.

The physical description of Daya Ram emphasizes his connection to the land and his ability to endure physical hardship:

“He was a well-built man, with strong legs and a dark, burnished skin. He wore a vest and dhoti, and had a red cloth tied round his head.” (24)

The description of his ‘burnished skin’ suggests long exposure to the sun, which is typical for farmers who work outdoors.

This heat of the plains turns out to be the major problem that Daya Ram would encounter on his walk. The burning sun has scalded the ground, and it will not take long before his feet are stinging. The burnt ground is an analogy of the effects of the sun on the earth. Not only the body, but also senses of Daya Ram are affected by the glare of the sun. And even his eyes are not used to the glare of the plains, and he has a hand up over his eyes, or look at the ground.



Cover Page



The bodily impacts of heat on the body of Daya Ram has been explained. The sun is blazing in the sky where his bare arms and legs are exposed. His body is in no time running with sweat and his vest is wet and it is clinging to his skin. The sun is beating down, meaning there is violence or aggression.

The terrain in which Daya Ram is walking is referred to as arid and uninhabited. Not a single tree can be seen near the lines, which are straight into the hazy blue horizon. There are no trees that offer some form of shade against the sun.

On his walk, water is the most essential requirement of Daya Ram. An hour later Daya Ram is thirsty; he is furred on the tongue, his gums dry, his lips are as parchment. The bodily manifestations of thirst are vividly stated. The water source that Daya Ram discovers is a muddy pool on which a buffalo is wallowing. He speeds to a location when he spots a buffalo lying in a muddy pool where he quenches his thirst by guzzling the stagnant water. He drinks in the same muddy pool where an animal is bathing showing his desperation.

Through the physical suffering, Daya Ram carries on with his walk at a constant pace. Nevertheless, his speed does not slow down. He has a single way to walk, and that is in this slow long step. This trait is mandatory to a farmer who is obliged to work all the time despite the weather conditions.

Human Deception vs. Natural Harshness

The recovery of the money at the railway station brings relief and joy to Daya Ram.

“To his surprise and joy, he saw a note in Hindi on the notice board: ‘Anyone having lost a bag containing some notes and coins may inquire at the stationmaster’s office.’” (25)

This event is a difference between the natural environment indifference and cruelty. When the sun is beating brutally and the ground is burning off feet, one of the fellow human beings has compassion, she is giving the lost money back.

The festivity that Daya Ram engages in after retrieving his money is in a tea shop. The rum which Daya Ram drinks causes a strong impact on his judgement and behaviour:

“Before long, Daya Ram had told his companion the story of his life. He had also paid for the rum and was prepared to pay for more.” (26)

The alcohol also affects his reasoning power to perceive danger and make prudent judgement.



Cover Page



2 2 7 7 - 7 8 8 1



Daya Ram later meets a man in the tea shop who says that he was robbed. Daya Ram sympathises with the suffering man and this incident makes him help. Daya Ram threw her arm around the man and gets him across the street and sits him on a step. The physical contact that is provided in assisting the man offers the chance of theft. The man opens his eyes as soon as Daya Ram turns the corner. He passes the bag of money in his shirt fold to the leg of his pyjamas. Then, thoroughly recovered, he is on his feet.

Daya Ram starts to analyse the day events in the train. Only after the train start moving, he comes to his senses and looks at what has befallen him. The story of Daya Ram shows his character by the emotional reaction he felt regarding his misfortunes:

“He was not worried (except by the thought of his wife) and he was not unhappy, but he was puzzled. He was not angry or resentful, but he was a little hurt.” (27)

The Daya Ram is brought back to some sense of balance by the conversation with another farmer on the train. There is a man beside him who resembles another farmer requesting beedi. The mere demand of a beedi brings about a relationship between the two men. Daya Ram has a beedi. He hands it over to the other man and lights it on his behalf. Very soon they are discussing crops and rain and their respective families. The discussion of agricultural issues brings Daya Ram back to the world he is used to.

The final part of the story stresses the fact that Daya Ram is a strong character who can continue despite the tragedies. Even though the slight discomfort still lingers in the back of his head, Daya Ram are nearly forgetting the incidents of the unfortunate day. The prospect of home, food and the familiar surroundings is encouraging and reassuring:

“He had his ticket to Dehra and from there he had to walk only three miles, and then he would be home, and there would be hot milk and cooked vegetables waiting for him.” (27)

The last picture of the story goes back to the natural setting and the natural progression of the life. He and the other farmer talk along, and the train pawing over the broad brown plain goes panting along. The train passes across the scenery, linking various destinations of people and transporting them to the destinations. The wide brown plain is left where it was at the start of the story, untouched by human sufferings.

Ecological Consciousness Across the Stories



Cover Page



Water as Recurring Symbol

Ecological awareness of Ruskin Bond has been presented through the symbolic use of the elements of nature in the three stories. Water is one symbol that is used in most of the stories, and it can be seen as various representations of life and human experience. In “Untouchable”, water is linked with purification, chilliness and a revival. The sweeper boy carries water in the tank and takes a shower on a regular basis and is seen clean and fresh despite his low social status. The rain at the end of the story happens to relieve the heat and fear indicating that nature is the restorer of good health. In the story, “Going Home”, water is a symbol of need and want. Daya Ram is thirsty and has to take water out of a muddy pool, this demonstrates how exposed the human beings are in the absence of water.

Mountains vs. Plains

The difference between the mountains and the plains in Ruskin Bond stories indicates the ecological zones and the effect they have on the life of human beings. In “Untouchable” the narrator says that his eyes are also not used to the plains gaze implying that he is not used to the plains but maybe the mountain. The mountains are represented as a cooler greener habitat that has more rainfall and vegetation. The plains particularly in the dry season, symbolise heat, dust and lack of abundance. This juxtaposition of the ecological zones depicts the sense of understanding of how the environment influences culture and lifestyle.

Trees as Characters

The trees in the stories by Ruskin Bond are not just the elements of the landscapes of the stories, but the characters themselves. The coral tree in “The Coral Tree” plays a very central role in the story and it has several symbolic purposes. The tree symbolizes home, childhood, beauty and continuation. The tree branches are crowded with the scarlet pea like flowers. Due to the presence of plenty of flowers, the picture implies vibrancy and life.

The lack of trees in “Going Home” is also important. No trees can be seen anywhere along the lines, which lead directly to the blue hazy horizon. Trees are absent and thus there is no shading, no cover against the sun. This lack highlights the severity of the surroundings and the defencelessness of Daya Ram. Trees are important in life as they provide shade, fruit, wood and homes to the animals. Their disappearance leaves behind a topography that is unfriendly to human wellbeing and existence.

Seasonal Cycles and Sensory Experience



Cover Page



The natural cycles of seasons and the weather patterns used in the stories show the way nature dictates life in India. A decisive change comes with the exploration of the end of the monsoon at the end of “Untouchable”. ““The rainy season has started,’ observed the sweeper boy, turning to me.” (19) It is rainy and it cools down the heat and water supplies crops.

The physical reality of the environment is involved in the sensory descriptions in the stories and makes the reader interested in the environment. Ruskin Bond does not just narrate what the characters see but also what they feel, hear and smell. “The scent of the wet earth blew in through the skylight and the rain fell harder.” (19) This is a fragment of the story, “Untouchable”, which caters to the sense of smell, the unique smell of the rain on the dry soil.

Physical pain that comes with environmental conditions is represented in the tales realistically. The heat is sweating and thirsty and weary:

“Soon his body was running with sweat, his vest was soaked through and sticking to his skin.” (24)

The feet get burned on the burnt ground. The burning sun has scalded the ground, and his feet are soon aching. These accounts of physical pain reinstate the strength of the surrounding forces on the human body.

The ecological approach in the stories brings out how the elements in the environment are related. The sun impact on the earth, which in turn is impacted on the plants, which in turn are impacted on the animals, which in turn are impacted on the human beings. Every living being needs water. The trees will also give shelter. Rain is something that is refreshing and promotes growth. Such links demonstrate that health and wellbeing of human beings are pegged on the health of the larger ecosystem.

Conclusion: Environmental Wisdom in Ruskin Bond’s Fiction

It can be seen that in the ecocritical analysis of “Untouchable”, “The Coral Tree”, and “Going Home”, Ruskin Bond is manifesting the world-view in which man and nature are intertwined. The tales philosophise against the anthropocentric approaches which put human interests first before any other interest. On the contrary, Ruskin Bond demonstrates that human life is influenced by the environment and that human wellbeing is determined by the health of nature.



Cover Page



Social criticism in “Untouchable” has even more strength, it has the environmental aspect. The storm and rain do not discriminate between all human beings, whether they belong to a certain caste or are of a certain social rank:

“I sat down, my back against the wall; beside the untouchable, the outcaste ... and the thunder and lightning ceased, and the rain came down.” (18)

The nature does not distinguish human hierarchy and division. This ecological perspective puts in question the social injustice by demonstrating the underlying equality of all human beings in their association with the natural world.

The nostalgia and the feeling of loss in “The Coral Tree” are related to certain locations and natural elements. The narrator is abandoning not only people but also coral tree, garden and scenery of his childhood. The ribbon is unhooked at her pigtail and was lying on the ground along with the coral blossoms. The picture of the ribbon and the flowers on the floor is an indication that beauty and closeness can be easily lost.

Daya Ram in the story “Going Home” illustrates the perseverance of the individuals living near the land. Farmers have to live with drought, heat, and other environmental factors:

“He and the other farmer chattered away, as the train went panting across the wide brown plain.” (27)

Daya Ram moves on to home, despite all his misfortunes inspired by the idea of his land, his animals, and his family. This toughness is based on the attachment to the land and the agricultural cycles of life.

The environmental awareness of Ruskin Bond in his stories can be used to provide insights on the current environmental issues. With a climate change, the deforestation, water shortage, and depletion of biodiversity, new urgency is given to literature describing the interaction between man and nature. The tales keep the reader in mind that human life depends on the physical surroundings and the destruction of the surroundings on the long run leads to the destruction of the human wellbeing.

The three stories analysed in this paper are used to illustrate various phases in the writing career of Ruskin Bond. In all these stories, the issue of the natural environment is the same. Ruskin Bond is writing as a person who has lived near nature and also someone who has taken a keen watch as to how human beings deal with nature.



Cover Page



To conclude, the ecocritical analysis of “Untouchable”, “The Coral Tree”, and “Going Home” shows that Ruskin Bond introduces nature as a being that is active in the life of human beings. The narrations demonstrate that emotions, relationships, and life experiences are preconditioned by environmental conditions. They show how human beings and nature are intertwined. They defy social conventions by demonstrating the fact that everyone is equally under the influence of nature. Ruskin Bond conveys an ecological wisdom through simple stories and straightforward, concrete language, and the wisdom of his message is that human life fundamentally depends on the well-being and wellness of nature.

Work Cited

Primary Source:

1. Ruskin Bond, Ruskin. *Dust on the Mountain: Collected Stories*. Penguin Books, 2009.

Secondary Sources - Literary Criticism and Ecocriticism:

2. Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
3. Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2012.
4. Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
5. Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
6. Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.
7. Kerridge, Richard, and Neil Sammells, editors. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. Zed Books, 1998.
8. Mishra, Sudesh. *Preparing Faces: Modernism and Indian Poetry in English*. Flinders University Press, 1995.