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Ruskin Bond's "Sita and the River": Spotlight on Surrender to the Eternal Green Spirit

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Abstract

Greg Gerrard in his book *Ecocriticism* states that "The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. It is a construction mobilised to protect particular habitats and species and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city" (59). As ecocritics embark on a path to deliver a new set of eyes to look at the world around us, they lead us into a labyrinth of interactions and negotiations between nature, man and culture. Ruskin Bond's stories explore at length the captivating beauty in every aspect of nature and highlights that every component of nature has its own intrinsic value and role to play in the intricate web of the almighty's design. His nature writing promotes the idea as pointed out in his *Book of Nature*, "Live close to nature and you will never feel

lonely” (30). What is refreshing is that he celebrates both the compassionate side of nature and the harsh episodes that throw destruction around like confetti. “Sita and the River” is an engaging story wherein Bond Sketching nature with the touch of a true connoisseur asks man to surrender to the eternal Green Spirit for renewal of life and resurgence of the soul. Bond awake to the resplendence of nature observes: “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” (60).

Keywords

Ruskin Bond; “Sita and the River”; Ecocriticism; Green Literature.

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Greg Gerrard in his book *Ecocriticism* states that Wilderness has a sacramental value. He adds that “The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. It is a construction mobilised to protect particular habitats and species and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city” (59). Ecocriticism strives to promote an authentic voice, a viable narrative with ‘nature for its own sake’ as the touchstone. As ecocritics embark on a path to deliver a new set of eyes to look at the world around us, they lead us into a labyrinth of interactions and negotiations between nature, man and culture. The large scale awareness and emphasis on resolving environmental problems has resulted in placing this mode of criticism in the spotlight. Ruskin Bond’s love for nature is all encompassing and all pervasive. He draws our attention to the natural brilliance manifest all around us by presenting a painstakingly descriptive record of the natural life around him. His stories gently influence the readers to introspect and reexamine their relationship with nature. Bond strongly believes that the different facets of nature are not only a source of

delight but also awaken us spiritually. Bond passionately radiates his fiction with exceptional images of natural landscapes and all forms of life and highlights that every component of nature has its own intrinsic value and role to play in the intricate web of the almighty's design.

Water is one of the greatest gifts of nature and Bond cannot suppress his excitement at how the tiniest drop of water travels far and wide, through high and low landscapes transforming in size and nature till it reaches the ocean. Bond does not regard nature as a mere background but as a wonderful power that nourishes our life. Nature renews him, excites him, offers him solace, companionship and provides him fodder for his creative imagination. What is refreshing is that he celebrates both the compassionate side of nature and the harsh episodes that throw destruction around like confetti. He is familiar with nature's wrath but perceives it to be a necessary step in nature's cycle of renewal. "Sita and the River" is a landmark story wherein Bond effectively portrays the inherent and inseparable relationship that man has with nature. In a brilliant analysis of the story, Meena Khorana says that "Bond explores his protagonists' changing relationship with the river, from a deep love and gratitude for its many boons, to an awareness of its duality, to an understanding of its mystical nature" (119). The story is set in a small village by the river. The river is the source of water and livelihood for the simple minded folk whose relationship with the river is one characterised by belonging rather than exploitation. Sita, a girl of ten lives with her grandparents in a hut with a giant peepul tree close by. Her world revolves around her home and her grandparents. The Peepul tree close to the river near her hut is Sita's favourite as she had heard how it stood strong during the flood that hit two decades back. It was around three hundred years old and provided shelter for a variety of birds that visited it from the mainland. Sita and her grandparents live in harmony with nature. She has a ragged doll for company which she calls Mumta. When her grandfather takes her ailing grandmother for medical help to

the nearby town, Shahganj, Sita is left alone at home in the face of an approaching flood. As the rains rage and waters rise, Sita panics. She had perceived the river to be her provider, her nourisher in whose safe havens she can always be happy. She confides in Mumta, her only companion, her own conscience. She worries whether the mountain Gods are angry with her. She thinks, “They don’t have to have a reason for being angry. They are angry with everything, and we are in the middle of everything” (29).

As her world stands on the threshold of a major metamorphosis, Sita struggles to make sense of what is happening. She wonders whether the Gods will save her just as she had promised to save Mumta. At one point, she shudders, thinking whether the Gods even know she is here. She hurriedly puts together an assortment of a few objects from their hut for safe keeping locking them in a trunk and climbs the peepul tree to protect her. To her shock she sees, “. . . the world has become one vast river” (226). She is appalled seeing people, cattle, trees and homes being swept away. She sees that the swelling waters moved by in a rage with a pair of slippers, a cane chair, grandfather’s turban, a kerosene can with hens perched on it and bloated cattle. In utter dismay, she realises that she had forgotten Mumta behind. In a rush of feverish enlightenment, it becomes clear to her that if she could forget her doll behind, how she can expect the Gods who have created the entire universe to notice her. The peepul tree begins to give way. The same tree that had bravely withstood the previous flood two decades ago sways and creaks and falls into the river. Sita is terrified and clings to the branches. Sita’s situation is paralleled to that of a mother crow that has a nest in the tree. Sita sees the nest overturn and the eggs falling into the river one by one. The mother crow immensely disturbed, hovers over the fallen tree, but eventually accepts what has happened and flies away. This helps Sita gain a new perspective in her relationship with nature. She understands that nature is multifaceted and understands that the flood is the manifestation of one such

facet. Nature has to from time to time destroy so that renewal and resurgence can take place. In such situations, one has little choice but to go with the flow of nature and not against it.

She grabs hold of one of the branches and finds herself afloat in the currents. Soon, a little boy, Vijay appears miraculously and rescues her. Vijay is from another village six miles from Sita's home and had set out in the morning to sell his father's mangoes at the Shahganj bazaar. Vijay helps her onto his boat and rows them to the safe banks. He observes, "We cannot fight the river when it is like this, we must go wherever it takes us" (233). They row into the forest wherein they decide to tie the boat and get some rest. Vijay's mangoes offer a delicious solution to appease their hunger. As a big sambhar stag comes floating in the water, Sita expresses her apprehension about the presence of animals nearby. Vijay says, "We are quite safe in the boat. The animals will not be dangerous tonight. They will not even hunt each other. They are only interested in reaching dry land. For once, the deer are safe from the tiger and the leopard. You lie down and sleep. I will keep watch" (235). Sita in her dream sees Vijay as Lord Krishna, her rescuer. After being jolted awake by the trumpeting of an elephant mother reuniting with her young one, Sita is entertained to the melodious notes of the flute by Vijay and soon the gentle bright rays of the sun greets them. Rowing through the forest for another hour, they finally reach a village from where a farmer offers to take them up to Karauli where he is attending the village fair. From Karauli, Sita and Vijay could take a train to Shahganj. They are accompanied by Phambri, the farmers' son who was going to take part in the wrestling matches at the fair. Driven in a bullock cart by Hukam Singh, a former soldier in the British Indian Army during the First world War, Sita and Vijay are treated to interesting conversations and colourful personalities mouthing the writer's thoughts on the importance of living close to the land, attitude towards success and failure and the like as is evident from Hukam Singh's dialogue when he sees the

cranes on the fields, “Life is one long struggle for the farmer. When he has overcome the drought, survived the flood, hunted off the pig, killed the crane and reaped the crop, then comes that blood-sucking ghoul, the moneylender. There is no escaping him” (240)! Sita and Vijay agree to attend the fair and witness the wrestling bout as the train to Shahganj was only that evening. Phambiri wins and treats the duo to syrupy rasgollas, almond filled fudge, little meat pies and orange juice. He also buys her colourful glass bangles when she refuses his offer of buying her a doll. She observes, “No doll, no matter how beautiful, could replace Mumta. She would never keep a doll again. That part of her life was over” (244). Phambiri takes them to the makeshift cinema at the fair. Finally at the end of the day, as Sita and Vijay board the train to Shahganj she wonders whether she will ever again meet these kind hearted people again.

When she finally bumps into her grandfather at the Shahganj bazaar, Sita could immediately see from his dazed look and pained eyes that her grandmother is no more. Her grandfather is equally surprised to see her at Shahganj. Vijay leaves them promising to visit Sita at the island soon. He gifts her his flute and says, “Keep it for me. I will come for it one day. It is a good flute” (248). Life at the island turns into a season of renewal and reconstruction. Sita plants a mango seed in the spot of the peepul and Grandfather gets busy making a vegetable garden sowing peas, carrot, gram and mustard. As the rains stop and the flood recedes, life turns to normal with green fields, cattle fairs, wrestling matches and happy people. Vijay visits Sita and as they playfully cool their feet in the water of the river, Sita observes, “Sometimes the river is angry and sometimes it is kind. We are part of the river” (25), says Vijay. The story closes with the river being described deep and strong flowing down the mountains into the sea offering means of shelter and livelihood to millions of people. The realisation that Sita is a part of the river minimises her sense of suffering. In one of his interviews given to Amita Aggarwal, quoted in Manish Bhatt’s book, Bond says: “I am close to nature for

the last forty years. In my fiction there is struggle with nature. Those who go with nature always survive such as - the girl Sita in the story “Sita and the River”, Bisnu in “Panther’s Moon”. I believe that nature has both the faces - gentle and destructive, but it is the gentle face that dominates. I have shown as nature really is” (72). “Sita and the River” beautifully illustrates how Bond sees the river as a symbol of the divine and communicates the same through the little girl’s response to the flood. Sita, now fully aware of the cycle of destruction, renewal and restoration cycle of nature accepts her grandmother’s demise with a brave heart. She firmly believes that the river or nature will look after those who surrender to her.

Bond shares the romantic belief that so long as man is in nature’s lap, he enjoys freshness of mind, spiritual insight and security. Like John Keats and William Blake, he observes the silent miracles of nature and celebrates it in its fullest form and like Wordsworth he extols the divinity of nature and views its world with spiritual reverence (Chandnani 143). His nature writing promotes the idea as pointed out in his *Book of Nature*, “Live close to nature and you will never feel lonely” (30). Bond loves being one with nature and being awake to its resplendence and desires the same from the readers: “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” (60). Wilderness allows for redemption, a spiritual sojourn and mediation with the self. The story offers the informed reader a chance to investigate the underlying ecological values and also revisit the human perception of natural resources. The most important function of literature today is to channelise all energies into awareness of the fact that the human is an integral part of nature. Sketching nature with the touch of a true connoisseur, Bond’s naturescapes are nature’s capes coated in the ambrosia of eco consciousness reassuring man, asking him to surrender to the eternal Green Spirit for renewal of life and resurgence of the soul.

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