

Beyond Ecodisaster: Locating the Ethos of ‘Eco-Emancipation’ in Select Fiction of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract

The biblical assertion regarding human credibility of “dominion over all the earth,” the Aristotelian idea regarding the existence of nature, plants and animals as “instruments” to be used for human purposes, Locke’s supposition that “the inferior ranks of creatures” are “made for human use,” and Marx’s depiction of nature as “man’s inorganic body” and “the instrument of his life-activity” have led the Western canon of thought and philosophy to justify the domination of humans over nature and the nonhuman others. Radically shifting from this line of thought, Sharon R. Krause and Romand Coles hold this biased attitude responsible for ecodisaster that, in a persuasive turn, opens towards the ‘manifold’ of ‘eco-emancipation’ that vindicates ‘human and more-than-human assemblages’. As theorised by Krause, the ‘polyface ethos’ of ‘eco-emancipation’ and ‘assemblage’ finds its representations in Ruskin Bond’s short stories. Included in *Treasury of Stories for Children*, Bond’s texts like “Tiger Tiger Burning Bright” and “Panther’s Moon” critique the ruthless killing of non-human animals and unyielding destruction of forests as signifiers of greater upcoming ecocatastrophe and endorse emancipatory “practices of worldmaking in tandem with...Earth others”. Bond’s novella, *Angry River* delineates the rage of nature and denotes ecodisaster as an agent of ‘eco-emancipation’ that looks forward to releasing the ecosystem from the speciesist and humanist “entrapment and exploitation that constitute environmental domination” and preventing humans both from exercising domination on nature and from suffering it. My paper seeks to explore how select short stories of Ruskin Bond posit ecodisaster (and even the understanding of upcoming ecocatastrophe) to play a catalytic role in driving home the idea of ‘eco-emancipation’ that champions human attunement and engagement with nonhuman nature and envisions a dynamic world order.

Keywords: ecodisaster, eco-emancipation, nonhuman nature, speciesist, humanist.

In *Facing the Planetary*, William Connolly observes that the ‘sociocentric’ views of humans never consider how human agency always interacts with ‘deeply nonhuman’ elements and “planetary forces with degrees of autonomy of their own”

(10). He goes further and opines that the domination of humans over nonhumans that often results in the misrecognition of the ‘socionatural hybridity’ in the environmental domain in which humans are constitutively entwined with nonhumans, with no one part being simply reducible to any other, paves avenues for environmental cataclysm, ‘ecodisaster’ (10-12). Down the ages, the notion of human domination over nonhuman elements appears as an overstatement regarding the range and efficacy of human power. The biblical assertion regarding human credibility of “dominion over all the earth”¹ justifies the ethos of human domination. The Aristotelian idea regarding the existence of nature, plants and animals as “instruments” to be used for human purposes² emphasises the note of human domination. Locke’s supposition that “the inferior ranks of creatures” are “made for human use,”³ and Marx’s depiction of nature as “man’s inorganic body” and “the instrument of his life-activity”⁴ have led the Western canon of thought and philosophy to justify the domination of humans over nature and the nonhuman others.

Shifting from the severe negative criticism of human domination and bias responsible for ecodisaster, Sharon R. Krause endorses a line of critical thought regarding ecodisaster that, in a persuasive turn, opens towards the ‘manifold’ of ‘eco-emancipation’ that vindicates human and more-than-human ‘assemblages’. With multiple reasonable re-considerations and futuristic visions (and revisions), Krause proclaims that ‘eco-emancipation’ does not tend to prove that human domination over nature and nonhumans is harmful and illegitimate. It examines the dynamics in human-nonhuman relationships and envisions alternatives to them (4). She observes that what makes human relationships with nonhumans and nature “one of domination is not the fact of our use but the insufficiently constrained structure of our power, and the unabashedly exploitative ends this power is permitted to serve” (3). The meaning of ‘eco emancipation’, as propagated by Krause, that combines “a status condition of nondomination with political respect for nature and a culture of eco responsibility, and identifying its plural, nonsovereign character” (126), finds its representations in Ruskin Bond’s short stories. Included in *Treasury of Stories for Children*, Bond’s texts like “Tiger Tiger Burning Bright” and “Panther’s Moon” critique the ruthless killing of non-human animals and unyielding destruction of forests as signifiers of greater upcoming ecocatastrophe and endorse emancipatory “practices of worldmaking in tandem with...Earth others” (24). The short story “Angry River” delineates the rage of nature and denotes ecodisaster as an agent of ‘eco-emancipation’ that looks forward to releasing the ecosystem from the speciesist and humanist “entrapment and exploitation that constitute environmental domination” and preventing humans both from exercising domination on nature and from suffering from it (125). Positing multiple subtexts that voice the holistic planetary wellbeing, these texts showcase the ‘polyface ethos’ of human-nonhuman-nature assemblage embedded in the concept of ‘eco-emancipation’ as theorised by Krause.

In an interview given to Amita Aggarwal, Bond shares that his short stories are developed from characters and events.⁵ Though his short stories, in most cases, are fragmented observations of events and characters, they often critique humanist biases and champion the ethos of the coexistence of the human species and the 'more-than-human world' (168). This is what we see in "Tiger Tiger Burning Bright" where a tiger is shown to live in a jungle adjacent to a village without doing any harm to anybody living in that village, and the tiger is treated by the villagers as 'Maharaja', the king of the entire eco-space. But when the jungle starts to be stripped off due to human civilization, the tiger begins to face a rapid contraction of his living space and scarcity of food. The tiger gradually is robbed of 'the natural privacy of the heavy jungle' (176). In his delineation of the threatened situation, the author shows all his empathy for the animal. He writes that ten years ago, there was a dense forest towards the right side of the area in which the tiger would have enough places to hide. But the dynamics of the entire place change with unplanned human settlement. Trees are cut to give room to humans and their houses, and now the tiger can only move to the left which is open towards the river (178). Being threatened by human invasion, the tiger turns violent and moves closer to the riverside part of the village. Being hungry and desperate, the tiger begins to attack domestic animals, such as the goats and buffaloes of the villagers. The villagers think that the tiger has turned into a fierce man-eater and subsequently decide to kill it. The killing of the tiger becomes a 'game' to the villagers. The authorial comment critiques the violent human action. The author opines that people involved in animal hunting treat the dead animal as a 'trophy'. The tiger was killed in the second attempt.

The text showcases that human activities and interventions are directly linked to the tiger's violence. And, above all, the author here straightaway raises the question of how far it is justified on the part of human beings to employ collective counter-violence against a tiger in its abode. The story ends with the reflection of Ramu's recollection of his grandfather's words: 'The tiger is the very soul of India, and when the last tiger has gone, so will the soul of the country' (180). Being baffled by this, he raises an 'overwhelming question': 'How can there be an India without tigers?' (180). These expressions present the tiger not as a representative of a particular species but as a genus that stands for nonhumans in the realm of nature.

Through the character of the village boy Ramu, the author raises the issue of ethics and the question of morality. Bond's approach in portraying animals seems close to the Kantian philosophy that our ethical duties to nonhuman animals are to be taken as our indirect obligations to other human beings. Keeping ethics at the centre of his argument, Kant, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, argues that each species has an innate right to freedom, which he defines as independence from being constrained by the choice of other species (236-37). Bond's approach justifies Kantian understanding. Like Kant, Bond critiques the limiting of animal rights to freedom by the human species. Referring to Kant's idea, Krause brings to

the fore ‘eco-emancipation’ as a fitting reply to the speciesist bias and humanist idea of freedom and domination. “Eco-emancipation”, according to Krause, entails a ‘nonsovereign kind of freedom’ (126). As opposed to individual or collective centrality, ‘eco-emancipation’ unfolds plurality “through relations of interdependence across individuals, communities, and types of being” (126). The text focuses on Ramu’s bewilderment that revolves around the rejection of the domination of the villagers to what Krause calls ‘nonsovereign kind of freedom’. His inability to think of India without tigers implies his emphasis on the ‘polyface’ of the coexistence of the human and the more-than-human world, as suggested by Krause. Bond does not end the text with the killing of the tiger as a semblance of a greater approaching eco-disaster. He rather raises moral issues to re-evaluate inter-species relationships and leads us to think beyond eco-disaster in an emancipatory way.

We find a similar kind of story in “Panther’s Moon” where a panther gradually becomes a threat to the people of the Manjari and Kemptee villages of Garhwal district in the Himalayan valleys. The panther is a menace to the villagers when it turns into a fierce man-eater. It continues to attack the villagers. A nine-year-old boy, Sanjay, the son of Kalam Singh, is attacked by the panther but survives anyway; afterwards, an old woman is also attacked. The killing of domestic animals has become a regular event. Kalam Singh decides to take revenge on his son’s brutal injuries and the villagers decide to put an end to all of this. The opportunity comes to the villagers when they catch the panther struggling in a stream where it falls while chasing a village girl. The panther gets killed by the sharp spears of the villagers. But after the death of the panther, Bishnu, the narrator, comes to realise that it has a deep scar on one of its feet caused by a bullet, and perhaps that is the reason why it turned into a man-eater, after losing the natural ability to run, leap and prey. Bishnu starts reflecting on human violence and gets scared by the thought of the death of the panther as a premonition to the greater cataclysm awaiting as the consequence of human intimidation, imposition, usurpation and violence. The text then moves on to delineate significant changes in nature. It parallels nature’s changing course with the psychic state of the narrator. It ends with several symbolic implications and Bishnu’s hope for a better world, “The sun appeared through a rift in the clouds. The leaves and the grass gave out a sweet, fresh smell” (138). The references to the bright sunbeams and the freshness in nature symbolise the restoration of hope in Bishnu for a dynamic and mutual world order.

Again, the author brings forth the issue of counter-violence and critiques its employment by humans as a reply to the natural impulses of the animal. Focussing on ‘eco-ethics’, Peter Singer believes that we should treat animals and nature in the same fashion we treat humans having similar cognitive credibility. He argues that we can never claim that only humans have the ‘right’ to kill and destroy nonhumans and nature because they are the members of the species called ‘homo sapiens’. He further observes that ‘speciesism’ and ‘favouritism’ among humans

toward nonhumans and nature is as unjustifiable as ‘racism’ toward fellow humans (76). Like Singer, Bond strongly critiques the ‘speciesism’ and ‘favouritism’ ingrained deeply in the human thought process and value system. The authorial employment of phrases like ‘the law of the jungle’ and ‘the right of the animal’ reveals how Bond justifies Singer’s views. Like Singer, Bond believes in the fact that intra-racial violence and abuse among human beings is as bad as inter-racial violence, and as pernicious as the cruelty and violence of human beings on any species. Bond’s representation resonates with the ideas propagated by the posthumanist critic Cary Wolfe who writes in *Animal Rites*, “The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes” (24). Wolfe’s idea considers the immense value of the inherent animality and natural impulse of responding in violence to animals and thus challenges the speciesist, humanist, binary opposition between humans and nonhumans or nature. This is where Krause’s concept of ‘eco-emancipation’ plays a significant role in understanding Bond’s text. Having strong philosophical connections with Singer and Wolfe, Krause observes that ‘eco-emancipation’ aims at proliferating an inclusive eco-perception that remains conscious of the disastrous ecological consequences without being confined to it. It rather engages human consciousness to the constant critique of ‘speciesism’ and ‘favouritism’ and looks forward to a better future. This is what we find in Bond’s “Panther’s Moon”. Bishnu’s reference to the convivial changes in nature is evocative of the instillation of hope in him for a better future, for a better world.

Ruskin Bond’s novella, *Angry River* offers a story of hardship and emancipation of a little girl Sita who lives in a tiny mud hut with her grandparents on an island enclosed by a river. When she was a kid, she lost her mother. Her father works in a factory and stays in a place a hundred miles away. Without the company of children of her age, she feels lonely and alienated here. Sita knows that the river is a provider to them, yet she contemplates that it is because of the river that she lives in loneliness. She shares her thoughts and feelings with her one and only friend, Mumta, a rag doll. The author-narrator writes, “Since there were no other children on the island, Sita shared her secrets with the rag doll, whose name was Mumta” (16). Sita does not have a formal education but her grandparents have taught her to admire the nurturing capacity of nature. One day Sita’s grandmother falls ill; her grandfather takes her to Shahganj for medical care. The text delineates Sita’s struggle with nature when the river rises to wash the island down owing to the onset of heavy monsoon rains. She leaves the mud hut and takes shelter underneath a peepul tree. Standing in the middle of the island, the tree is as old as the island itself, and it seems to withstand any catastrophe. Sita obeys her grandmother’s instructions to always remain in the shelter of the old peepal tree and climbs to its top. A young man named Krishan saves her and takes her to the nearby coastal village. During her struggle with the ‘angry river’, she loses her only friend, Mumta. With the help of a farmer, Sita reaches Shahganj. She meets her grandfather and comes to know about the death of her grandmother. A few days

later, the devastating river calms down. Thinking about the rage of the river that has taken away her grandma and her friend forever, Sita continues to remain sad and dejected. She starts contemplating how the river turned ‘angry’ and how it became disastrous. Emphasising the interdependence of humans and nature, Krishan and her grandpa instil hope and confidence in her. She and her grandfather make their way back to the island; they work hard and rebuild the mud hut. She finds no trace of the peepal tree. She is baffled by the enormous contribution of the peepal tree in saving her life. She plants a mango tree in the same place. She and her grandfather begin to shape a beautiful garden by growing flowers and vegetables. It is quite important to mark how Bond showcases human intervention in restoring harmony in human-nature relationships.

Though major parts of the narrative delineate the devastation caused by the ‘angry river’, the text does not end with the note of ecodisaster. Towards the end, the text rather focuses on Sita’s greater lessons, realisations and emancipations. With the growing mango tree and the restoration of their living space, Sita begins to feel a sense of accomplishment. She realises that even though the flood has caused havoc, it also has offered her the right kind of opportunity to rebuild and create something new on her terms. Now she realises the nurturing capacity of the river that has enabled her to be ready to face whatever challenges come her way in life. The flood offers her a devastating experience, but it has taught her the importance of resilience and perseverance. It has also taught her to take care of and appreciate the little things in life. The moment she starts appreciating the surrounding environs inclusive of the nonhuman beings and things, she finds a deep sense of belonging to the entire eco-space. She realises that life is not about getting or having everything, it is rather finding solace in what you have. She comes to understand that more than individual happiness in terms of subjective fulfilment, living together with surrounding people and nature matters most in life.

Initially, Sita used to consider the river responsible for her loneliness. She contemplated that she could never be free from the clutches of the river since she was always surrounded by the waterbody that channelised and conditioned her life in a particular way. But the devastation caused by the ‘angry river’ has expanded her consciousness to the extent of spiritual enlightenment. Now she realises that this is how nature teaches and guides us by inflicting hardships upon us. To her, the river seems to be a character, an ever-living entity, a guardian angel and a true agent of nature. She knows at heart that the confrontation with the ‘angry river’ has made her a better human being; she realises that if one lives close to nature, she/he can never feel or be lonely. An inclusive idea of freedom shaped by the spirit of coexistence and togetherness dawns on her, and she leaves the idea of settling elsewhere.

Again, we see that the text does not end in the environmental cataclysm caused by the ‘angry river’. From the point of the representation of the natural catastrophe, it rather rises to respond to significant subtexts that could be directly linked to Krause’s idea of ‘eco-emancipation’ that endorses ‘thinking beyond’ to

the extent of envisioning a dynamic world order (5). Referring to Donna Haraway's call of 'becoming-with',⁶ Krause theorises that 'eco-emancipation' "involves not just doing things that refuse environmental domination and reconstruct political communities but being in new kinds of relationships, relationships in which we ourselves become new" (133).⁷ Connecting Haraway's call of 'becoming-with' with the idea of 'becoming new' in "eco-emancipation", Krause states,

This becoming-with is not so much an intermingling of fixed essences as an iterative, layered process of mutual influence among beings and things that are always in the midst of becoming something else. (133)

In Bond's text, we see that Sita's struggle caused by the devastation of the river has made her experience the entire eco-space, and it plays a crucial role in finding her belonging through the spirit of coexistence. Despite the geo-political adversities, the disaster connects her emotionally with the eco-space and offers her newer avenues of belonging. The moment she realises that she has become one with the surrounding nonhumans and environs, she rises to an inclusive idea of belonging and becoming in tandem with the idea of living together. She starts exploring her relationship with nature and begins to attain a sense of emancipation that Krause calls 'becoming new'.

Krause's idea of "eco-emancipation", suggesting a continuum of eco-consciousness across different species, draws on an inclusive human-nature relationship and creates newer dynamics through which existing anthropocentric configurations of power can give way to alternative formations and dynamic relational paradigms between humans and nature. It accentuates a nonsovereign understanding of the freedom of humans and 'Earth others' (138-139). In her theorisation of the play of power in driving home a nonsovereign idea of freedom, Krause refers to Neil Roberts's notion of "freedom as marronage" that emerged against the backdrop of the nineteenth-century Caribbean and American slave communities. In *Freedom as Marronage*, Roberts writes, 'marronage' is "a shared refusal of the condition of slavery" and the making of an alternative, self-governing power pattern (3-4). It involves 'freedom without sovereignty', a literal and metaphorical flight of both the dominant and the 'other' from the physical site of bondage or imposition (5). According to Roberts, 'marronage' is a dynamic and ever-active struggle against domination (56).⁸ Borrowing from Roberts's idea, Krause conceptualises that 'eco-emancipation' is 'a more-than-human marronage' that follows a non-linear, ever-shifting trajectory to ensure a nonsovereign freedom for both, the humans and the 'Earth others' (133). She opines that "eco-emancipation perpetually exceeds itself in ways that cannot be predicted or controlled. This marks another aspect of the nonsovereignty of freedom in this form" (133). This is what we find in Bond's texts. In "Tiger Tiger Burning Bright", Ramu's contemplation on the killing of the tiger is a critique of human domination on the 'Earth others'. He believes that human violence can be fatal to the inherent pluralistic ethos of India. His hope of an India with human-nonhuman harmony

speaks of what Krause mentions as the ‘polyface’ of ‘nonsovereign freedom’. In “Panther’s Moon”, Bishnu’s hope for a better world free from ‘speciesism’, entrapment and exploitation, that constitute environmental domination, justifies the mutual rejection of the condition of intimidation and the non-linear trajectory of ‘nonsovereign freedom’ embedded in ‘eco-emancipation’. Bishnu’s vision highlights a shared refusal of habitation (by humans and nonhumans) conditioned by violence, intimidation and imposition; it looks forward to a mutually shared sense of emancipation. Sita’s reflection on inclusive world order in *Angry River* rejects humanist bias and speaks of an emancipatory flight of both the dominant and the ‘other’ (‘Earth others’) from violence and domination.

Ruskin Bond’s texts selected here for study celebrate the ethos of “eco-emancipation”. They represent human domination and ecodisaster only to critique them. They keep open all the possibilities to obtain a greater emancipatory flight of thought that incorporates the spirit of an ever-active struggle against domination in any means or form and celebrates a dynamic political order of coexistence and mutual care in the world. They bring forth a dynamic flip of domination and emancipation and champion an insight towards achieving a more-than-human idea of freedom that resonates with what Krause calls a dynamic ‘continuum’ or ‘emancipatory openness’ (126). In “Tiger Tiger Burning Bright” Ramu despises human domination and violence over nonhumans and hopes for a world shaped by the perfect harmony of humans and nonhumans. Bishnu envisions a world without speciesist domination, humanist bias and anthropocentric binary opposition in “Panther’s Moon”. *Angry River* shows how Sita’s struggle with nature ends in instilling in her the dynamic spirit of living together with nonhumans and nature in a mutual oneness. Bond’s texts do not end in violence, domination, cataclysm, catastrophe or disaster, they continue to move further to envision an ever-expanding sense of being, belonging and becoming. The continuum of thought and the open-endedness we find in these texts contribute to the ethos of nonsovereignty embedded in the concept of eco-emancipation and speak of the innumerable possibilities to shape a better world. These texts remain open and celebrate enormous emancipatory possibilities of greater world order through constant human attunement and engagement with nonhuman nature.

Notes

1. *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 1:26.
2. *Politics*, Bk 1, Chap. 8, p. 45.
3. “Second Treatise of Government” 271.
4. “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” 75.
5. This interview is published in part as “Appendix A” in the book, *The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond* by Amita Aggarwal.
6. Haraway observes, “To be one is to become with many” (*When Species Meet* 4).

7. See chapter 3 of Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble* for further understanding.
8. Krause connects the uncertainties embedded in 'eco-emancipation' with the in-between nature of nonsovereign freedom as theorised by Roberts. The point worth mentioning is that Roberts's idea does not endorse the absolute absence of domination. It rather acknowledges that domination problematises the situation, generates uncertainties and plays a crucial role in shaping emancipatory equations.

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