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The Symbiotic Relationship Between Human Consciousness and the Himalayan Landscape in the Works of Ruskin Bond

Dr. Somanchi Sai Kumar

Lecturer in English

Government Degree College Amadalavalasa Srikakulam District Andhra Pradesh

Mail id: somanchisaikumar@gmail.com

Abstract

In this research paper, the researchers have broadly discussed the symbiotic relationship between human consciousness and the Himalayan context in the literary works of Ruskin Bond from a broad eco-critical perspective. This research examines Bond's depiction of the physical environment, as not just a picturesque backdrop, but an active, living and sentient world, in conversation with theories of Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism and environmental activism. The paper, by deconstructing the basic text like *The Room on the Roof*, *The Book of Nature*, *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, *Rain in the Mountains*, has proved that the progress and elevation of man is in close correlation with the preservation of the ecology. In the end, Bond's books are an ageless declaration of human greed's evil and of the need for a more comprehensive perspective: that humans are coinhabitants of the natural world's tapestry.

Keywords: symbiotic relationship, human consciousness, declaration of human greed, physical environment

1. Introduction

The connection between the physical environment and literature has been the subject of much critical examination from the perspective of 'ecocriticism' – which is the study of how human culture and nature are deeply interconnected. Ruskin Bond's name is inextricably entangled in the geography, flora and fauna of Indian Himalayan region in the canon of Indian English literature. Bond is considered the "resident Wordsworth" of India, as he has been a passionate lover of nature the most of his life in Dehradun, Mussoorie and Shimla, the hill stations.

But Bond's ties with the Himalayas is not romantic appreciation only, it is a relationship, a complicated, symbiotic one between the landscape and the human consciousness which continually influence and nourish each other. In his works, the natural environment that includes mountains, rivers, trees and wildlife is not a passive backdrop, but an active "actor in the drama". All people undergo different experiences of the nature and gain knowledge in their way and the climate, seasons and geography have a significant impact on human character and thoughts. Bond's stories convey the message that humans, both biologically and spiritually,

rely on the natural world and that the severing of the ecosystems web leads to emotional and environmental devastation.

This paper will examine how Bond's literature embodies this symbiotic relationship, through the healing of the mountains, biocentric equality in his profound ecological perspective, and his attack on the assimilation of the sacred by modernity and the industrial forces that threaten to sever that bond between mankind and the Earth.

Deep Ecology and Biocentric Equality as a holistic worldview.

To fully understand the symbiosis in Bond's works, one should use the philosophy of Deep Ecology, which states that everything living and non-living has an intrinsic value independent from their usefulness to human beings. In the past, the human perspective of "anthropocentrism" (human as the supreme rulers of the globe) has been the cause of nature's exploitation. Bond, in contrast, preaches a bio-centric world philosophy that eradicates the human-Environment divide. The Value of the Micro-Ecosystem Bond, in *The Book of Nature*, painstakingly records the micro-ecosystems of the Himalayas and shows that even the tiniest of organisms have a right to be and play a role in ecological equilibrium. He says that he's fascinated by the minute, complicated constructions of the small creatures, that the smallest insect in the world -- the fairy fly -- is the "perfection" even though it's only one fifth of a millimeter in size. Bond's strong ecology awareness also shines through in his essay *The Civilized Wilderness* in which he considers the inherent value for a simple blade of grass. As he paraphrases the words of poets Walt Whitman, he says that it would be "obviously a poor thing" if no "ladybirds" or "crickets" were living on the planet "if the grass didn't grow," and finishes with "It wouldn't be much fun living on a planet where grass couldn't grow". Bond brings insects and grass up to the same levels as humans so as to point out that all ecological substances must be preserved in order to run the environment.

Co-Existence over Dominance Bond's writing is a heavy critique on the parameters of utility as the only way to measure the value of nature in the human experience. Deep ecology is a way of increasing the awareness of humanity with respect to nature, paying attention to the web of life in which all are connected. In these tales such as "All Creatures Great and Small," Bond depicts a home where a collection of unusual beasts—a monkey, a python, a hornbill, people—live together. In many of Bond's semi-autobiographical stories, the aging grandfather is a central character whose refrain is, "we must acknowledge their rights," since animals are losing their homes because of human encroachments. Herein lies a philosophy (mutual coexistence)

of the man not being the master of the earth, but being its co-functionary, who must learn how to share the space in an equitable way.

The Landscape as a Mirror and Moulder of Human Consciousness

Bond's fictional universe is often a reflection on the internal processes of the characters, and the physical environment can trigger a characters' psychological awakening and emotional growth. This is best illustrated in his first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, and its sequel *Vagrants in the Valley*.

The main character in *The Room on the Roof*, an Anglo-Indian boy named Rusty, starts his life confined in his guardian's stiff and formal European-style house, that of Mr. Harrison, a strict guardian. This house "high walls" and "shut windows" create a physical and psychological barrier between Rusty and the natural world. It was an artificial enclosure which symbolizes the harshness of colonial and societal expectations. Throughout the year, Rusty always longs for Freedom, a symbol of the untamed and wild nature, which is always found on the horizon in the shape of mountains.

The natural world is a metaphor for Rusty's psychic state when he finally escapes the prison and goes into the bazaar, the forest and the hills. Weather is a gauge of his moods: if the weather is misty and cloudy, he will be gloomy, if sunshine, he will be cheerful. Especially rain makes Rusty "crazy" with joy; his nerves dance to the pitter-patter of the first shower, which marks the washing away of the strict influence of his guardian and his rebirth into an independent being.

In the sequel, *Vagrants in the Valley*, the landscape also reflects the journey of the protagonist. The dry, stony and dusty road that Rusty and his friend Kishen walk is a symbol of the "desert phase" of settlement that the two men endure, and the lush valleys of orchards that they travel to are a symbol of the oasis in which they find rest and hope for settlement. They have the opportunity to be directly connected with the vastness of the sky, mountains and clean air resulting in an improved mental health and the spiritual connection city-dwelling failed to provide for boys. The lyrics "the whistle of freedom" refer to the idea that the wind carries the message of freedom, a call to action for people to move beyond society's limits and live within themselves. Bond's writing is based on the healing and spiritually uplifting power of nature. He always presents nature as a place of solace for the human being when he is faced with grief, trauma or the hustle and bustle of modern day life.

Bond's own childhood experiences were characterized by loneliness and death, at an early age for his father. But instead, he concealed his pain by investing in the "innocent beauty of the

hills", seeking solace and consolation. The short story titled "Coming Home to Dehra" follows a young Bond when he copes with his father's death by gazing out a large window at an untrimmed litchi garden and the marigolds. Superbly written account of the healing power of nature and how nature is a guardian, saving the boy from the unwanted misery and letting him grieve according to his own time, without society's pressure.

Mountains as Spiritual Sanctuaries Bond associates the mountains with places of great spiritual importance. He associates the height with moral and spiritual uplift: the mountains are "cathedrals" where it is possible to develop a rapt religious consciousness." The inhabitants of the mountain slopes at Garhwal, says he, have "long since learned humility, patience and a quiet reserve". **Rain in the Mountains** portrays the monsoon season as one of spiritual renewal: "When the rain falls, it cleanses the earth but also our souls, and renews the human relationship with nature.

This healing power is further emphasised in the novel *Delhi is Not Far*. The narrator is sure that his friend Suraj, who has a fit from time to time, will be cured by 'Mother Nature' in the hills. The idea that a life without experience of, or living in the mountains is incomplete, is a Wordsworthian idea of the efficacy and restorative power of the natural environment. The soul of nature and the soul of man are deeply alike, so to be in close contact with the former is to purify the mind and elevate the individual spiritually, Bond believes.

Upon the Green Earth: Conscience Guardians of the Trees.

Bond's ecological perspective is extended to sentient and morally responsible plant life surrounding him, mostly trees. He believes that trees are not mere commodities for human consumption; they are living long-term companions, ancestors and manifestations of the Divine. **Trees as Parental Figures** Trees are the focal point in Bond's personal and literary world. In his reflections he famously says "The trees stand watch over my day-to-day life. They are the guardian of my conscience. I do what I think, they would approve the most". In this instance, personification puts trees in the place of moral supervisors. Trees offer Rusty the "parental presence" in *Vagrants in the Valley*; when the wind is blowing through the trees, he imagines his guardian "tenderly" whispering to him, the warmth, chillness and shade of a mother.

My Father's Trees in Dehra is a beautiful illustration of the deep connection between trees and humans. Bond remembers that his father used to take him to plant saplings on a rocky island in a dry riverbed, and his father used to say: "If people continue to cut trees and not plant them, the world will soon be one big desert. Years later, Bond comes back to see that the trees had

started to multiply and the land has become a wildlife paradise for birds and animals. He believes that the trees "know him", that they "whisper" to him, and that they "beckon" him near, and that they move: "trees used to move and they will move again", his father had prophesied.

Young Rakesh plants a cherry seed and nurtures it through various perils—a goat eating its leaves and a grass cutter severing its stem. Rakesh's commitment is one of a bio-centric attitude, indicating the need for patience and care in order to be connected. The tree finally grows and starts producing fruits and Rakesh puts his fingers on the smooth bark of the tree and asks himself, "Is this what it feels like to be God? This incredible moment of transformation reminds Bond that to care for nature is to touch the human spirit directly to the divine.

Threat to Symbiosis: Modernisation and Ecological Crisis

Bond celebrates the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, and he is also a fierce environmental activist, albeit incidental, attacking the rapacious ecological destruction by modernity, commercial greed and urbanization. It is the same with the symbiotic relationship between them, which, if it breaks, means disaster for landscape and human consciousness.

Deforestation and Limestone Quarrying Bond is strongly opposed to the systemic destruction of the Himalayas for infrastructural and industrial developments. The moving tale "Dust on the Mountains" is about Bisnu watching the mountains destroyed by limestone quarrying. Bond graphically says how the "top of the mountain was missing—blasted away by dynamite"—and the barren wasteland lacks grass, flowers, birds and butterflies. The "skeletons of a few trees" are foreboding reminders of a land pillaged by man's avarice. The quarrying process causes pollution problems with air, water and noise pollution; with the human and non-human life of the area being violently displaced.

Nor, in 'Death of the Trees', does Bond grieve over the unnecessary killing of 'resplendent Oaks, Deodars and Maples' by the Public Works Department as it expands roads. For him, this destruction is not only a loss of the environment but a tragedy; he sees the loss of this tree in its prime as akin to his young brother dying in a road accident.

Bond's treatment of the plight of wildlife is done with much empathy and is directly related to how the landscape is destroyed. A tragic story of a trusting Leopard who was killed by poachers for its skin is "No Room for a Leopard". Bond highlights that deforestation has pushed animals into human lived-in valleys and put them at risk of death. He also mentions that all the forest goes still once the leopard is dead, which means that the soul of the jungle has been betrayed by humanity.

Bond reckons that the tiger is "the very soul of India, and when the last tiger goes, so will the soul of the country", in his "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright". The shrinking forests are "denying the right to life" of the animals, creating an uncertain and vigilant life for them, Humans cannot be given the exclusive right of the earth, Bond writes, as "a man needs the land as much as a tiger needs the jungle.

7. Nature's independence, strength and the final say.

The picture of a ravaged environment is a sobering one, but Bond's prose offers the suggestion that nature has a gritty independence. Human beings can destroy, nature can heal, reclaim, and if need be, overwhelm human constructions. Nature the Savior: When humans do their worst damage to the environment, nature is our good fairy. Dust on the Mountains tells the story of a truck loaded to the gills with quarried limestone rolling over the edge of a steep gorge, saved by a strong tree from harming the driver and crew. The driver recognizes, "It was the tree that saved me". This incident gives Bond the impression that man keeps inflicting damage on the Earth's resources, but nature continues to offer him a way of salvation and mercy.

In "Sita and the River," a young girl who lives on a small island in the Ganges is swept away by a huge flood. Tied to a large peepal tree that gets swept away, she is able to survive by clinging to the branches of the tree until she is rescued. Although the river is described as an angry, dynamic force, it remains "good" and the story focuses on the need to live with and give in to the chaotic nature of the river's flow.

The Bond of the Fury of Nature doesn't idealize nature as something to be admired without fear of its power and destructive force. In Earthquake which is set in Shillong, Bond experiences the fearsome earth quaking and turns grand hotels and busy bazaars into a rubble. The earth "bulged out and then came crashing down", illustrating the power of nature over mankind's engineering. But, in the midst of all the chaos, the animals come forth as a superior example of an affinity with the earth, able to sense on a "sixth sense" that something is up before humans. It seems that the earthquake aftermath reflects the human strength and the need to adapt to the environment instead of trying to conquer it. The remaining Burman people decide to construct their house again "with small rocks" so that it can "sway and rock... but not fall to the ground" in case of future quakes.

Floods, earthquakes, forest fires, Bond says in these scenarios, they can all remind us of one thing: "Earthquake, tidal wave, hurricane, flood, blizzard, all come to remind us that we are not, after all, the masters of the universe",. We can dynamite mountains and fell forests, but "the forces of nature are greater than man's",.

The Ecosystem Approach: Biodiversity and the Micro-World

A full study of the extent of Bond's environmental literature requires going beyond standard classifications of nature writing and employing David Landis Barnhill's "ecosystem approach". It sees the literary text, in turn, as a space of complex interaction in which various aspects—natural history content, personal natural responses, ecosocial politics and spirituality are embedded harmoniously. In *The Book of Nature*, Bond combines this two-pronged narrative technique, transcending genre to present himself as both a memoirist and a travel writer, a botanist and a philosopher.

Part of Bond's intent on the ecosystem approach is a deep appreciation for the micro-world of insects, weeds and shrubs, aligning him with a biocentric equality. He doesn't just poetize the grand mountains and rivers, he instead takes a microscope approach to the finer details of the environment. For example, in his study of the smallest insect in the world, the "fairy fly," which he describes as being "perfection," he observes its "perfectly crafted structure. He points out, for example, that less important plants like wild jasmine and bramble are just as important as trees for "binding the earth together and preventing erosion. Through the medium of a blade of grass or the small insect, Bond highlights the importance of an organism and how it plays a crucial role in the big picture of the globe; without its existence, the planet would not exist.

The Journey from Innocence to Experience: An Eco-Allegorical Reading

Bond's stories often find their protagonists in nature, where he uses the landscape as a location to chart the evolution of his characters' psyches – as a kind of eco-allegory for the human path from innocence to experience. This is because the children in Bond's stories are pure and are in touch with nature without the idea of utilization, that is, they are in a state of primal innocence.

How Far is the River is the story of one 12-year-old boy who has an irresistible, innate drive to walk 7 miles to "know it personally" and experience the river. The exploration is fun and draws a sharp contrast to the "business as usual" attitude of the grown up world, highlighting the innate ecological bent of unspoiled early childhood consciousness. Likewise, in *The Meeting Pool*, after 10 years Rusty and his friends make a commitment to meet back in the secret pool. As a grown-up, Rusty goes back home, only to see that his friends are no longer there—and the pool has been replaced, but there's a new pool nearby with a bunch of new kids. It is a beautiful depiction of the effects of aging, of moving into adulthood, and of the eternal cycle of nature, renewal and balance.

In addition, many times, nature becomes a substitute protector of the child when experiencing loss. Young Bond struggles with the pain of his father's death and his mother's emotional absence in *Coming Home to Dehra*, as he gazes down at a large window that looks out onto a shabby garden, filled with litchi trees and marigolds. The nature world is soothing and enveloping, a quiet healing presence to shield the child from the brutal society's demands and let him mourn in his own pace, in a peaceful setting.

Ecofeminism and Symbiosis between the marginalised

A critical movement which sees a direct link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the nature can be used to understand Ruskin Bond's literature in the context of Ecofeminism. Women and nature are both seen as passive entities by androcentric societies that are ready to be dominated and exploited. Bond's stories defy that assertion with its often glorification of women and children as the actual custodians of ecological harmony, with a wisdom that seems intuitive rather than the ultimate result of capitalist greed.

Rural women hugged trees in the Garhwal Himalayas to protect them from being cut down, and Bond's regional slant strongly taps into this context. This female environmental responsibility is reflected in the characters such as Binya in *The Blue Umbrella*, a young girl whose existence is totally linked with forests and fields, as opposed to the consumeristic greed of the male shopkeeper Ram Bharosa.

Bond takes *Sita and the River* as a "wilderness romance" in which a young girl, Sita, grows up with her grandparents on a small island in the River Ganges. A big flood engulfs the earth and Sita hangs on to the branches of a big peepal tree, taking her down safely until she is saved by a boy, Vijay, who rescues her. The story illuminates the fact that although the river can be a raging beast, it is good, and the key to survival is not to try to conquer it but to somehow go with the flow of nature. Also, an elderly woman named Miss Mackenzie guards rare botanical knowledge in The Himalayas, and is in charge of it in *The Prospect of Flowers*. Her death is shown as a return to the mountains where the "blue gentian and purple columbine grew," an ultimate union of the feminine spirit and the wild, and a sacred one.

The "Civilized Wilderness" is lost as a result of urbanization and tourism.

One of the themes in Bond's later novels is the way in which rural simplicity is juxtaposed with the relentless progress of urbanization. Bond presents the idea of the "civilized wilderness" a state in which man lives rather intimately with nature and with respect, and he bemoans its demise. He is forthright in criticizing the "discordant march of material progress," which he

thinks is an opiate for the mass of humanity, and is weakening the bond between man and earth.

Such ecological damage is documented with heart-wrenching precision in stories such as *Dust on the Mountains*, in which Bisnu himself participates in the gradual erosion of the hills by limestone quarries. The dynamite has been used to make the mountains into a "desolation," where even the "skeletons of a few trees" are left behind, and grass, flowers, butterflies and birds have disappeared. The quarries cause devastating air and water pollution, uprooting wildlife and locals have been forced to flee for their lives.

Bond has also been very critical on the infra-structural works carried out by the Public Works Department (PWD). In *Death of the Trees*, he compares the senseless cutting and removal of beautiful trees such as maples, deodars and pines for the expansion of roads to the death of his own brother in a car accident. He regrets the departure of lovely forest birds like magpies and minivets from the forests which are ripped by the roaring bulldozers. Moreover, he condemns reckless tourism and sport hunting. In *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright*, he explains how the intrusion of hunters has deprived the animals of "the right to live," bringing the tiger—the "very soul of India"—closer to extinction. He says humans have no right to monopolise the Earth, but makes the analogy that "a man needs the land as much as a tiger needs the jungle."

Resilience & Renewal: Nature's Ultimate Authority

Bond's works, while a testament to his seeing all the devastation of nature, are rooted in the conviction that Nature is indomitable, and in the end superior to human endeavors. He does not idealize nature so as to overlook its wild and awesome might. In a story set in Shillong, Bond portrays the fear-some earth power that can bring human engineering to rubble. The biggest hotel and the busy bazaars of the town are ruined in no time.

But amid all this debris, Bond emphasizes a couple of important ecology points. First, he points out animals' better relationships with the earth: birds, dogs and cats have a "sixth sense" and know well in advance when a disaster is coming and get out of the way before people even realize what's going on. Secondly, the consequences of this earthquake highlight the need for human adaptation, not conquest. There remains some of the Burman family who decides to rebuild their home using "small rocks" – rocks that can "sway and rock" with the coming earthquakes and so maintain a harmonious life with the natural world's unstable tempo.

Human beings are shown as destroyers and nature is shown to be the savior in Bond's frequent portrayals. In *Dust on the Mountains*, a truck loaded with quarried limestone, careens down a steep gorge and its driver is able to escape because the truck gets caught in a strong tree. When

the driver finds out that the tree saved him, it is a reminder of Bond's belief that nature always manages to give grace even when man keeps on abusing it. Bond's final message is: "Earthquake, tidal wave, hurricane, flood, blizzard, all come to remind us that we are not, after all, the masters of the universe... Nature will always have the last word".

Conclusion

In his copious short stories, novels and essays, Ruskin Bond gives a rich eco-critical account of the interdependence of human consciousness and nature. Bond points out that humanity's psychological wellness, spiritual uplifting and physical survival are all based on the health of the ecological web and that by dissolving the boundaries made by anthropocentric thinking, he shows how this is true.

By carefully and lovingly recording the plants and animals of the Himalayas, Bond creates the foundations of a bio-centric philosophy that requires respect for all life, big and small, the majestic tiger and the diminutive fairy fly. His "works are immersive; they sit at the intersection of 'songs of innocence' and the cold, hard truths of the 'age of environmental crisis' and make a gentle but resonant statement for the environment. He calls attention to the inevitability of impoverishment of the human soul in the light of the irreversible damage done to natural elements through deforestation, uncontrolled urbanization and the capitalist commodification of nature. As we are ever more industrialised and naturally estranged, Bond's writings provide a much needed route "to the civilised wilderness". He shows his readers that it is not progress to conquer the earth, but to be able to live sustainably and symbiotically in it. Every time Ruskin Bond reminds us that "Men come and go; the mountains remain", he makes one wonder about humanity and its position as a caretaker of Mother Earth, rather than the master of the universe.

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